

BLACK L VE — IS — POWER

The Asha Project SOS Campaign
Final Report
October 2023



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Executive Summary

The City of Milwaukee continues to experience precipitously rising numbers in three critical areas which are of great concern to The Asha Project (Asha). These are new incidents of domestic violence (DV), and intimate partner violence (IPV), significant brutality in DV/IPV incidents, and homicides related to DV/IPV. City crime data tells us that by far those dying and/or committing the highest number of DV/IPV incidents reported in Milwaukee are among those in the African American community. Consequently, it is incumbent upon us as survivors, intersecting service providers and stakeholders in the community to be intentional in addressing the fact that women, mothers, sisters, and grandmothers are maimed or murdered at alarming rates due to DV/IPV and related community violence that is preventable.

Furthermore, we believe the spikes in DV/IPV, and substantial brutality in incidents are exacerbated by the multi-faceted effects of the COVID-19 pandemic that disproportionately impact African Americans and other communities of color. Asha, a culturally responsive DV/IPV program, asked themselves, what can we do differently to effectively disrupt this cycle of violence because women and Black women in particular are increasingly dying and leaving numerous children behind.

Saving Our Sisters and Saving Our Selves (SOS) is our current response led by a content expert researcher. SOS is a program of The Asha Project's Ujima Men's Program that is culturally responsive, and trauma informed for African American males who use violence and abuse in domestic and intimate

partner relationships. SOS combines a unique campaign along with focus groups with Black men to gather data for analysis on DV/IPV and community violence which is a little explored area that we believe can help. The Asha Project (Asha) formerly Asha Family Services, Inc., founded by Antonia Drew Norton (Vann) in 1988, is an initiative with End Domestic Abuse WI/Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence since 2017. Asha is a 35-year-old culturally specific African American DV/IPV program based in Milwaukee's African American community and is one of the first such programs in the United States.

The primary goal of the SOS campaign is to reduce domestic and intimate partner violence and related homicides committed against women and Black women in particular who represent the largest group losing their lives. The campaign utilizes the universal distress signal SOS meaning to alert people to help services and resources available in the community for particularly Black men who may be struggling with, for example, depression, anger, and anxiety in relationships as well as a history of trauma. The SOS project is unique because it is not just culturally responsive and trauma informed but is community based, free of charge, and free of "red tape" and does not involve law enforcement. SOS pilot runs mid-April to mid-May 2023. It currently provides limited services due to funding; however, it makes referrals to appropriate providers in the community. SOS destigmatizes Black male help seeking and diverts Black males ages 18 and up from engaging in:

- Behaviors that lead to Domestic Violence (DV)/Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and
- Acts of community violence and

- Law enforcement contact which can serve as a barrier to seeking support.

As such, the Asha Project has partnered with Creative Marketing Resources (CMRignite) to develop and implement a culturally focused antiviolence public awareness campaign targeted toward Black males to encourage help-seeking.

SOS Focus Groups – Importance of Data Collection

In any effort one may hypothesize solving a problem and what can work. In our case, we also wanted to know is it replicable. Given these factors, it was critical to involve research components up front to design and capture important data. Most importantly, at Asha we believe those closest to the problem are closest to the solution. Two primary areas of data collection involved:

- The impact of the SOS campaign in the community and
- Conducting Focus Groups with Black men in Milwaukee's central city.

Our project was fortunate to secure Dr. William Oliver, Indiana University who has researched and studied the target group in the context of violence in the community and between intimates for nearly 3 decades for this project. Dr. Oliver conducted the focus groups with African American males and integrated campaign data into a final report with findings and recommendations.

The WHY behind this Campaign:

When the SOS campaign launched in 2022, there was a sense of urgency behind it, that was inspired by factors and challenges. This included emotional and psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Milwaukee's Black community and the stigma associated with help-seeking among many African Americans. SOS was designed to destigmatize Black male help seeking.

The Why of SOS:

- The fact that Milwaukee experienced record numbers of DV/IPV related homicides, rising incidents of new DV/IPV occurrences, and record numbers of brutal near-fatal assaults in 2022. One of the disconcerting homicides involved the murder of a former Asha victim advocate, Desiree Harris that reminded us that DV/IPV is no respecter of persons – it does not discriminate. And,
- The stunning words and actions of a 26-year-old Black male, Larvell Huddleston who went Facebook Live minutes after he shot and killed the mother (Arieuna Nicole Reed age 23) of his young son Egypt. In the Facebook Live confession, Larvell Huddleston barricaded himself with his son in his apartment and said, *"Hey ya'll, this mental health thing is real!"*

The Facebook Live incident that took place early 2022 was a wakeup call that was relentlessly haunting. As Larvell talked to his camera audience while walking room to room, pacing, and intermittently yelling at police from his balcony, he looked into his camera and stated, *"There is no justification for what I just did...none."* He also stated several times that there was no place for him to go to deal with the mental

challenges he has been experiencing most of his life and that this was the breaking point for him he shared. For me, I was stunned, hurt, and saddened as he provided a rarely captured, deepened insight into this phenomenon. It was a clear call to action that service providers and our community needed to work together to do more to meaningfully assist those who are struggling with mental wellness and intimate partner and other relationships.

What was striking to me in Larvell's conversation was what he didn't say, compared to what he did. For example, he spoke to someone into the camera who owed him money and told him to, "*Give the money to Her parents*". He stated she has good parents..." "*They are good people*"; however, he never mentioned anything about his own parents or his family which does not mean they are the opposite of hers, but it was notable. I wondered many things including what happened to him and what if he knew he could speak to somebody like Bro Shawn Muhammad, Asha's Associate Director who is also over the Ujima Men's Program. I thought what if he or his guys or his family members knew Shawn Muhammad would have helped him? I wondered how many others like him are similarly struggling. In his talk, Larvell began to yell off his balcony at Police to come and get his son. Subsequently, shortly after going off Facebook Live, Larvell took his own life. He did not hurt his son. However, in this incident, Larvell Huddleston shot 3 people killing 2.

- [WISN 12 News excerpt](#)
- [WISN 12 News](#) (Updated report Jan 2023)

I believe that the preventable deaths of Arieuna and Desiree along with that of many other domestic and intimate partner violence victims in Milwaukee must not be in vain. As COVID-19 has become part of our new normal, women will continue to be maimed or die at increased numbers leaving numerous children behind. What we as providers are doing is not enough. We must work together and be intentional in doing something different to keep women and community safe.

Behavior Change Partner:

The initial launch of the SOS campaign was successful, in large part due to a strong partnership with Creative Marketing Resources (CMR), Wisconsin's largest African American-owned communications agency. And it is my hope that the second phase of the campaign will be bigger and better, allowing the messages and resources to reach an even broader audience of men in need, ultimately saving the lives of more women like Arieuna and Desiree. The campaign primary areas include zip codes 53206, 53208, 53209, 53210, 53212, 53216, 53223 that comprise the City's Office on Violence Prevention (OVP) now called the Office on Community Safety and Wellness (OCSW) targeted Promise Zones. As we plan to expand the campaign to include: QR codes, virtual sessions, Text Messaging, Facebook, Instagram YouTube, Billboards, Bus Cards and an interactive website, it is important that we have a strong local partner to implement a campaign of this magnitude.

What we as providers are doing is not enough. We must work together and be intentional in doing something different to keep women and community safe.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to:

The Asha Project team. I can't thank our team (Adrienne Roach and Shawn Muhammad) enough for a job well done providing innumerable hours making this unique effort come to realization that provides significant and positive results.

Special thanks to The Greater Milwaukee Foundation for providing financial support that allowed The Asha Project to implement the SOS Anti-Violence Public Awareness Campaign and supplemental SOS focus groups with African American males.

A Special thanks to Adrienne Roach, Asha's Grants Manager for the countless hours expended coordinating the administrative aspects of the SOS project.

Special thanks to Shawn Muhammad, Asha's former Associate Director for the recruitment of the African American men who allowed their images and voices to serve as credible and authentic messengers in the SOS Campaign. In addition, Shawn Muhammad recruited many of the SOS Focus Group participants – the men in the community who voluntarily participated in the focus groups sharing their thoughts and concerns about intimate partner and community violence.

Special thanks to Pastor Joseph Sellers for recruiting participants in the community, for the final Focus Group of Black males to discuss issues and challenges with community violence and intimate partner violence.

Special thanks to Creative Marketing Resources Ignite (CMR) for its creative and instinctual connection within the community that informed the SOS Campaign marketing and strategies that proved relevant to the implementation of the SOS Anti-Violence public awareness campaign.

Special thanks to Criminologist, Dr. William Oliver, the content expert, and researcher who was responsible for eliciting the voices of African American males to inform the work of ending violence against women and community violence in Milwaukee's Black community.

Special thanks to Ms. Betty Brown Drake for providing the background work to support the assembly of participants and fielding service request calls resulting from exposure to the SOS media campaign.

My deepest gratitude to you all!

Antonia Drew Norton, Director

The Asha Project

Campaign Overview

The Asha Project (End Domestic Abuse WI) partnered with CMRignite (CMR) to launch the Saving our Sisters, Saving Ourselves (SOS) public awareness social media campaign that focused on African American/Black males in at-risk communities in Milwaukee, WI.

The campaign would assist the Asha Project with diverting Black males ages 18-47 challenged by inapt use of anger and aggression against their partners and within the community away from carceral systems, with the delivery of culturally responsive, trauma informed supports.

CMR's focus was to develop a campaign that resonated with the audience using representation of key figures in the community and through authentic messaging. CMR also tracked a multitude of metrics including impressions, reach, clicks, click-through rates, cost-per clicks, engagements, and more while The Asha Project focused on tracking new client referral sources. This data collected would allow us to understand what is working and how we can adapt and improve the campaign moving forward based on data.

Campaign Objectives

- CMR to develop and launch campaign messaging across multimedia platforms to reach over 100,000 people in Milwaukee's Black community.
- Based on the results from the campaign, the Asha Project would aim to enroll 50 Black males ages 18 to 47 into non-mandated programming leveraging the results from the campaign.
- Based on the results from the campaign, the Asha Project would assist 10% or up to 8 men enrolled in securing family sustaining employment.
- Based on the results from the campaign, the Asha Project would make a variety of referrals with follow-up to trauma informed, mental health and substance abuse treatment services in the community.

Target Audience

- The target audience is African American males ages 18 to 47.
- Reside in the most marginalized areas of the city of Milwaukee and live at or below the federal income guidelines for poverty including zip codes 53206, 53208, 53209, 53210, 53212, 53216, 53218, and 53223.

Organic Social Media

The Asha Project's social media campaign, SOS (Save Our Selves), kicked off in April 2023, which is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Three organic posts and ads were created to engage the target audience and direct them to the Asha Project website.

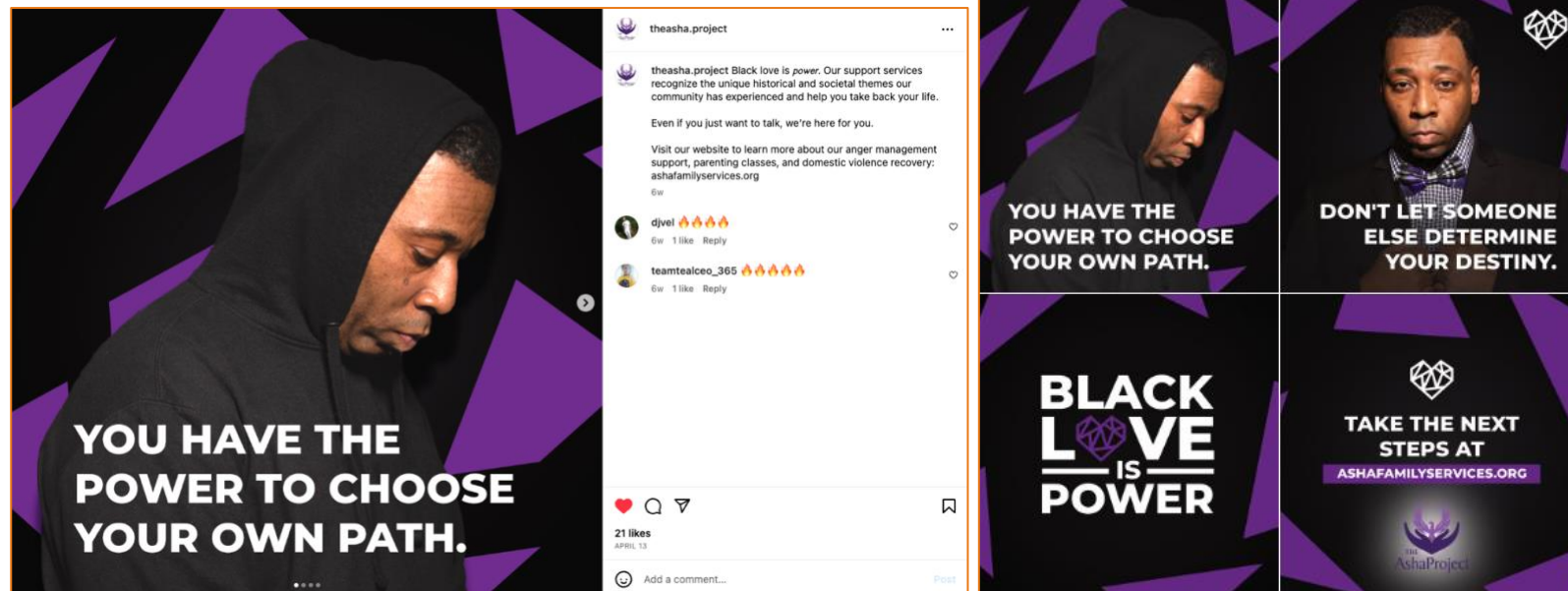
Campaign Details

From April 13 through May 18, 2023, three Facebook and Instagram posts were developed and shared for the Asha Project's SOS organic social media campaign. The following metrics were earned on Facebook and Instagram. Please note that reach is an estimate, as there may be overlap across platforms.

Post	Reach	Reactions	Link Clicks	Comments	Shares
Post 1	453*	30	1	2	6
Post 2	565*	19	1	0	2
Post 3	206*	8	0	0	0
Total	1,224*	57	2	3	8

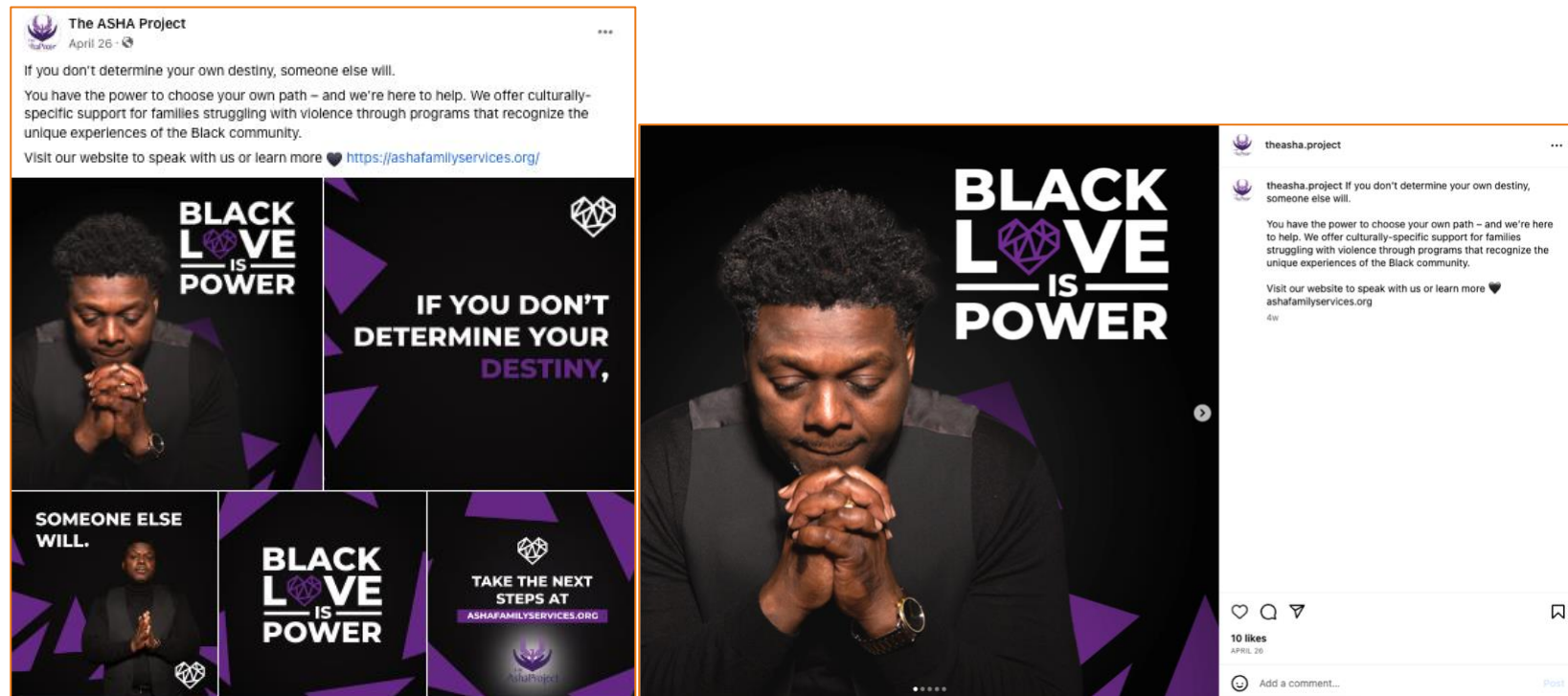
Below are the organic social media posts:

Post 1:

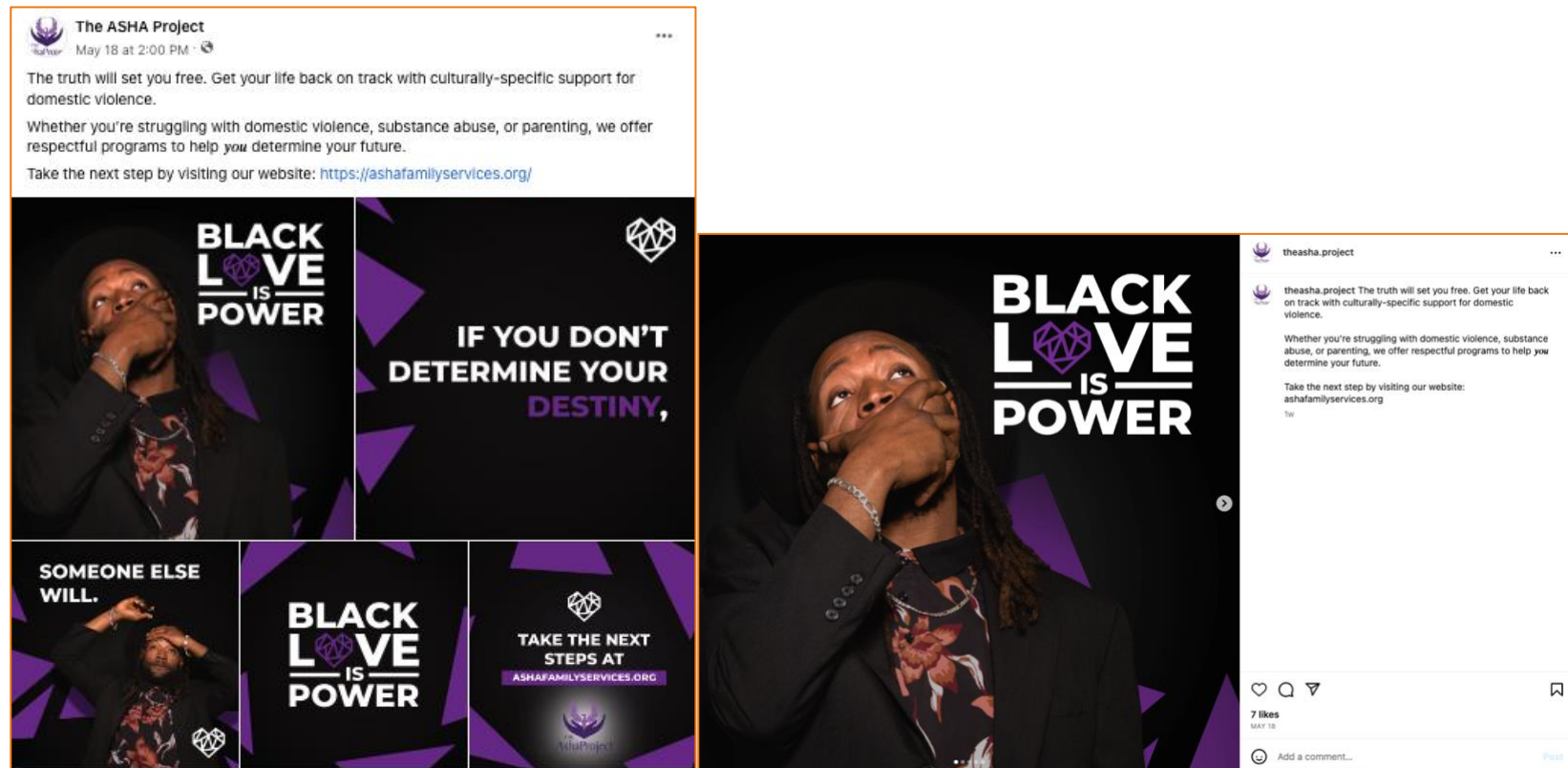


This post earned the most engagement (30 likes), generated primarily by Facebook, where ASHA Project has 4.5k followers, compared to their 232 Instagram followers. The primary image is bold and compelling. Two people commented on the post, which likely helped the post perform better in the platforms' algorithms.

Post 2:



Post 3:



Paid Social Media


Campaign Details

Facebook and Instagram ads ran from April 12 through May 24, 2023, with the Traffic objective to drive the target audience to the Asha Project Contact page. These ads earned the following metrics:

Impressions	Reach	Post Engagements	Link Clicks	Link Click-Through Rate (CTR)
730,901	69,040	4,056	3,915	0.54%

Government and advocacy ads on Facebook have an industry CTR of 0.07% (source: [Braffton](#)). Based on the ad below, it's CTR, as well as the overall campaign CTR, is much higher than industry standard. This is impressive given their serious nature, which can sometimes deter people from engaging.



Below is the ad with the highest CTR (0.62%):

**The ASHA Project**
April 11 · 🌐

Black love is *power*. Our support services recognize the unique historical and societal themes our community has experienced and help you take back your life.

Even if you just want to talk, we're here for you.

Visit our website to learn more about our anger management support, parenting classes, and domestic violence recovery.



[Learn more](#)[Learn more](#)

Creative Analysis

The “Choose your own path” ad, which had the highest click-through rate, was also the most-engaged with organic social media posts. It’s likely that audience members felt drawn to the photo of the man with a hoodie and connected with “Black love is *power*.” Additionally, the phrase “you have the power to choose your own path” is empowering and engages the viewer immediately.

Findings & Recommendations

The organic posts and paid ads received positive engagement, with no negative comments or issues. People responded positively to the authentic imagery of the social media content. The content was relatable, down-to-earth, and wasn’t pushy, which encouraged the target audience to engage with it. The ads reached almost 70,000 people and earned almost 4,000 clicks to the Asha Project’s contact page, increasing website traffic, and helping more audience members find support.

We recommend incorporating video content to the campaign in the future. Clips of survivors sharing their stories would be particularly moving. Videos often receive high engagement and better results than static images, so if campaign budgets allow, this would be an excellent addition to future campaigns. Running Instagram Page Likes ads would be another way to increase the ASHA Project’s page followers, reach more people in the target audience, and create a larger platform through which to push out Asha Project content in the future. If budget allows, we recommend creating an Instagram Page Likes campaign in the future, since the Facebook following is already substantial (4.5k followers, versus the 232 Instagram page followers).

Printed Materials

This campaign also included production of campaign materials that can be shared and disseminated to neighborhood groups, businesses, events, and individuals within the communities who are experiencing domestic violence, related events, and other violent crimes in the city of Milwaukee, WI. A total of 350, 18 x 24-inch posters and 250, 4 x 9-inch push cards were printed to support this campaign.

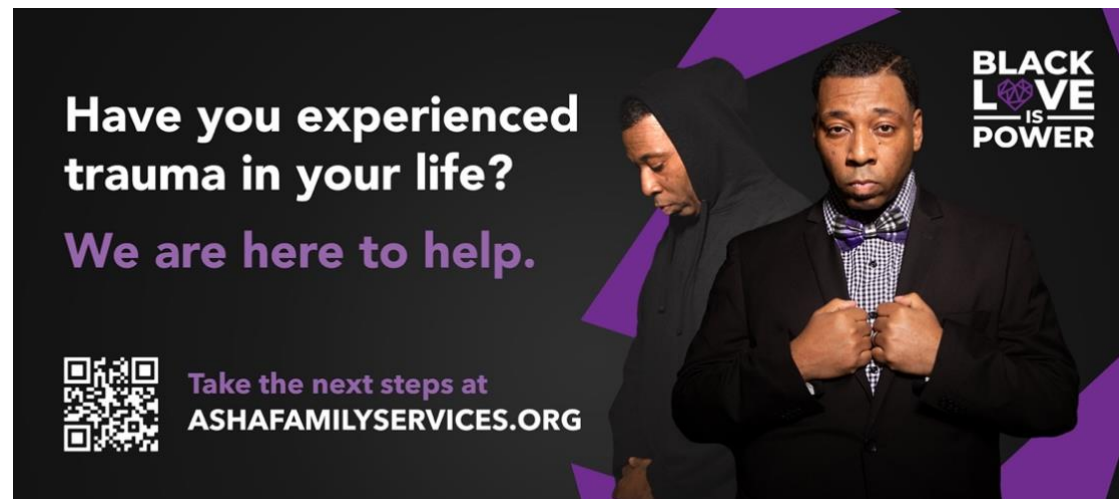
The 18 x 24-inch poster to the right, shows the 'Black Love Is Power' campaign theme featuring those key figures in the community. The direct message we include is, "Have you experienced trauma in your life? We are here to help" to show that both victims and perpetrators of violence are not in this alone. We encourage them to take the next steps at Asha Family Services.



Poster



Push card (Front)





Push card (Back)

This section includes other creative concepts that were developed for the campaign featuring the other key figures in the community from the professional photoshoot.




**BLACK
LOVE
IS
POWER**





 Have you experienced trauma in your life?
 We are here to help.

Take the next steps at
ASHAFAMILYSERVICES.ORG

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Campaign Terms and Definitions

Impressions: The number of times your ads were on screen.

Reach: The number of people who saw your ads at least once. Reach is different from impressions, which may include multiple views of your ads by the same people.

Post Engagements: The total number of actions that people took involving your ads. This can include liking, commenting, clicking, sharing, and other interactions.

Link Clicks: The number of clicks on links within the ad that led to advertiser-specified destinations, on or off Facebook.

Click-Through Rate: The percentage of times people saw your ad and performed a link click.

The SOS Focus Group Study – Supplementing the SOS Violence Prevention Awareness Campaign

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of the **Saving Our Sisters and Saving Our Selves (SOS) campaign** is to divert black males ages 18 to 47 challenged by inapt use of anger and aggression against their partners and within the community away from the punitive use of the criminal justice system with the delivery of culturally responsive, trauma informed supports. The SOS project was divided into two distinct phases: Phase 1 involved the development and implementation of a violence prevention public awareness campaign launched on multiple platforms. The goal of the violence prevention public awareness campaign was to increase community awareness about the occurrence of intimate partner violence and community violence in inner-city Milwaukee and to encourage boys and men experiencing violence-related risk factors, including unemployment, mental health issues, lack of marketable skills, and relationship challenges to reach out to The Asha Project for direct intervention or social service referrals. Phase 2 of the SOS project involved the convening of focus groups including inner-city black men for the purpose

of gaining insight from them regarding how they and similarly situated men understand and attribute meaning to intimate partner violence and community violence in Milwaukee's African American community.

SOS Focus Group Methods and Procedures

The primary unit of data collection for the SOS focus group study involved the convening of four focus groups. A focus group is a small group interview or conversation that is used to determine the perceptions of the participants. More specifically, focus groups are used to gather information about a particular topic or issue by facilitating a structured discussion in which the facilitator encourages participants to share perceptions, experiences, and points of view about a specific topic. One of the major benefits of focus groups is that they allow researchers and organizations to collect information about a topic in a short amount of time. In addition, the focus group method of data collection is less costly to implement than in-depth one-on-one interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The SOS focus groups were conducted with African American males who were currently or previously received services from The Asha Project. In addition, The Asha Project director of batterers intervention programs engaged in various outreach efforts to recruit individuals not currently or previously receiving services from The Asha Project to participate in the SOS focus groups. The focus group questions were crafted to enhance understanding of how men who reside in inner-city neighborhoods in Milwaukee

view the causes, justifications, and consequences of domestic violence and community violence in neighborhoods experiencing the highest rates of fatal and non-fatal violence in Milwaukee.

The researcher contracted by the SOS project developed a Focus Group Discussion Guide that included 14 questions and related secondary probes that were used to facilitate each focus group discussion. Part one of the discussion guide posed questions designed to uncover participants' views on the causes, justifications, consequences perceived to be associated with violence committed against female romantic partners. In addition, part one of the Focus Group Discussion Guide included questions that encouraged focus group participants to discuss what they perceived to be the role that social media plays in contributing to conflict among romantic partners and what recommendations they would suggest for reducing intimate partner violence in the African American community. In part two of the SOS Focus Group Discussion Guide questions were designed to uncover participants' views on the causes and justifications of acts of community violence (e.g., assault, aggravated assault, robbery, and murder) occurring among black males. Similar to part one of the Focus Group Discussion Guide questions were also included to uncover participants' views on what role social media postings play in conflict and violence among black males and what they believed should be done to prevent and reduce the occurrence of peer-based community violence in disadvantaged inner-city neighborhoods.

SOS Focus Group Participants

Four focus groups were conducted with black men who resided in various inner-city neighborhoods in Milwaukee. There was a total of 21 participants who ranged from ages 22–67, with the average age being 45.7. 12 of 21 participants were currently employed. In addition, 12 of 21 participants reported that they had problems in the past with illegal substances. Furthermore, 9 of 21 participants reported that they had been previously arrested for a violent crime. And 8 of 21 participants reported that they had been previously convicted of committing a violent crime. Finally, 5 of the 21 participants reported that they had been previously required to participate in a batterers program.

Three of the focus groups were conducted at The Asha Project in a private meeting space. One of the 4 focus groups was conducted at Mother Scott's Christian Youth and Family Center in Milwaukee. Participants were asked to complete a brief demographic profile, in which they reported their name, age, sex, area of residence by zip code, employment status and whether or not they had ever been arrested and/or convicted of a violent crime. In addition, participants were asked to indicate if they had ever been mandated to participate in a batterers program.

Prior to the beginning of each focus group discussion the participants were asked to adopt a pseudonym/fake name that they would use and be referred to during the focus group discussion as a way to protect their anonymity in the final SOS report and/or any published accounts of the focus group findings in the future. The pseudonym/fake names were recorded on the demographic profile and on

table tents that were placed immediately in front of each participant. This procedure was adopted for the researcher to know who was speaking and for focus group participants to refer to each other by their pseudonyms/fake names rather than their actual names. The focus groups lasted anywhere from 2 ½ to 3 hours, including time allocated to inform participants about the goals of the SOS project and the specific procedures that would be employed to facilitate the focus groups. In addition, during this time, participants were asked to listen to, read, and sign a consent form pertaining to their participation in the focus groups. For their participation in the SOS focus groups each participant was provided with a \$25.00 gift card.

Analysis Procedures

The focus group audio recordings were transcribed into a Word document. Subsequently, the transcriptions were subject to qualitative content analysis in order to uncover common themes in the participants' responses to questions posed during the focus group discussion. Following content analysis of the first focus group transcript, a Thematic Coding Guideline was developed to facilitate consistency in the coding of subsequent focus group transcripts. The Thematic Coding Guideline was designed to be iterative. That is, the Thematic Coding Guideline was expanded if new themes emerged as a result of content analysis of each subsequent focus group. In addition, in an effort to provide a comprehensive reporting of participants' responses to the focus group questions, where a participant or several participants express responses that were opposition to the general direction of the participants'

general responses to a particular question or discussion of a particular topic, such comments were categorized and reported as Contrasting Views.

SOS Focus Groups Participants Views on Relationship Conflict and Intimate Partner Violence

Domestic violence is a unique type of interpersonal interaction because these abusive and violent incidents occur among individuals who are romantically and emotionally connected. Dobash and Dobash(1984) have reported that most acts of domestic violence begin with some type of argument or conflict between the romantic partners about a specific issue. Similarly, the focus group participants identified several sources of conflict that they believed tend to lead to acts of domestic violence among African Americans. Included among the major sources of conflict the focus group participant identified were:

- Economic Stress/Financial Challenges
- Frustrated Black Men
- Lack of Exposure to Healthy Male/Female Relationships

- Ineffective Communication and Lack of Conflict Resolution Skills
- Father Absence and Relationship Conflict
- Importation of Street Identities into Romantic Relationships
- Alcohol and Drug Consumption/Intoxication/Contrasting View

Economic Stress and Financial Challenges

Research examining the prevalence of domestic violence by social class and particularly income, consistently reports that as social class increases, the likelihood of domestic violence decreases. As such, low-income women have been found to be at increased risk of exposure to intimate partner violence during their lifetime. Furthermore, research indicates that men who experience unemployment or chronic unemployment are at greater risk of DV perpetration (Benson & Fox, 2004). Consistent with what is known about the relationship between low-income status and domestic violence the men who participated in the SOS focus groups tended to agree that in situations in which the male partner lacked the financial resources and/or effort to contribute to the maintenance of the household was a major source of conflict between black men and women involved in a romantic relationship. For example:

Facilitator: What are some of the major sources of relationship conflict between men and women who reside in your community?

JR: *Money. Not bringing in enough to cover basic necessities are a big reason for a lot of disagreements and conflict.*

Nemo: *Not having enough. It creates conflict in a relationship because there should be defined roles and I'm finding in our communities it's not. So that causes conflict among brothers and sisters.*

The focus group participants extended this portion of the discussion by describing how when a man lacks economic resources, the relationship and the household is vulnerable to stress. They further noted that when men lack economic resources it increases the likelihood that they will be subject to criticism directed at them by their wives and girlfriends.

Frustrated Black Men

In the social science literature that examines the plight of black males in America an omni-present theme is the claim that the black male experience in America is imbued with a great deal of stress and frustration (Madhubuti, 1990; White & Cones, 1999). For example, when compared to white men, black men are disproportionately represented among men who are unemployed, poor, incarcerated, have never been married, and/or live separate from their children (Mincy, 2006; Wilson, 1996). Throughout the focus group discussions there were continuous references to the challenges that black men encounter in the larger society that hinder their ability to successfully enact the traditional male provider or breadwinner role. Focus group participants tended to describe black male frustration as resulting from the existence of various structural barriers that hinder black men's ability to successfully enact the role of self-sustaining adult man able to function as a provider and protector for one's family, as a

significant factor contributing to relationship conflict and the perpetration of intimate partner violence against their wives and girlfriends:

Moe: *The black male is very, very frustrated because... of the things that he goes through in his daily life. Everywhere he goes, he's rejected. Everybody naturally wants love. Everybody naturally wants to be loved. We do things, we act out in ways. And sometimes those ways are self-destructive. And we act out in ways that are indicative of wanting love. When we go to work, a lot of the time we're rejected. When we go to the store, they think we are stealing. Were rejected? A lot of times we don't know why our dad don't want nothing to do with us, we're rejected by our parents.*

Lack of Exposure to Healthy Male/Female Relationships

In one of the rare studies of African American men examining their views on domestic violence, Williams and Becker (1999) found that their respondents believed that domestic violence among African Americans is influenced by the lack of healthy role models to emulate. Similarly, the SOS focus group participants reported that both non-violent interpersonal conflict and acts of domestic violence involving romantic partners in the African American community was related to the fact that many black males lack exposure to healthy male/female relationships during their childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. For example:

Phynox: *No parents in the household, no guidance in the community or, you know...that's what is missing.*

Moe: *A lot of us don't know how to have proper relationships and we don't even know how to properly love. You got to remember when you take a people, and they go through 400 years of slavery. Where they're kept in complete darkness... We don't know what a family structure looks like. We don't know what a marriage looks like. We have no idea. Can't even picture it in our mind. Never seen it, a day in our life. And so, if you can't even picture it not even, you can't even envision what a healthy relationship looks like.*

As the focus group discussion of sources of conflict leading to intimate partner violence evolved the men elaborated on how the lack of exposure to healthy male/female relationships is specifically precipitated by father absence and ineffective communication. As such, the thematic findings pertaining to lack of exposure to healthy male/female relationships, father absence, and ineffective communication are not mutually exclusive, but interrelated. That is, the focus group participants suggested that lack of exposure to healthy male/female relationships is associated with relationship conflict and domestic violence as a result of the compounding and cumulative negative effects of father absence, ineffective communication, and ineffective conflict resolution skills.

Father Absence and Relationship Conflict

The number of children living with two parents has dropped since 1968, while the percentage living with their mothers only has doubled. For example. In 1968, 85% of children under 18 lived with two parents (regardless of marital status); by 2020, 70% did (U. S. Census Bureau, 2021). Regarding race, it was reported that in 2020 37.5% of black children lived with two married parents, compared to 75.5% of white children. Furthermore, it was reported that 3.4% of black children lived with two unmarried parents, compared to 3.1% of white children. Finally, and related to what is reported immediately below, the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) reports that in 2020 nearly half (46.3%) of black children under 18 resided with their mothers only, compared to 13.4% of white children under 18. While this data does not say very much about the degree of father involvement with their children when not residing with them.

What it does indicate is that there are many black children growing up without a father in the home. Consequently, and related to this social reality, there was general consensus among the focus group participants that a major factor contributing to relationship conflict and intimate partner violence is father absence. According to the focus group participants father absence erodes the likelihood that young black males will be exposed to healthy male/female relationships. Essentially, the focus group participants suggested that when men are absent from the household, young boys do not have routine exposure to men and women working in harmony or resolving relationship conflicts in a non-violent and mutually respectful manner:

Facilitator: But do you see any relationship between fathers being absent and conflict between black men and women?

Remi: *Well, you can't expect a woman to be able to raise a boy into a man, completely. I mean, she can teach him basic things, you know, but when it comes to really knowing how to conduct yourself, how to take on the responsibility, how to handle certain situations in life. Even if it's just living everyday life as a man, a woman wouldn't know exactly how to go about that. So, when you take a man out of the boy's life, you take an intricate part of structuring his life. I mean, structure is important to everything...It's even a certain structure to chaos, you know?*

Facilitator: I don't think I heard you say how father absence is associated with conflict between black men and women.

Remi: *Because a father not being around, he wouldn't be able to... lead by example. That's the best way to teach. So, if he's not around, he cannot show his son how you're supposed to deal with your woman. How exactly to be a provider. How to keep a job. How to be present in your home and love your family. How to take care and nurture your woman...You know what I mean?*

Another participant characterized the association between father absence and relationship conflict between romantic partners in the following manner:

Mark: *Because even though there are churches, even though there are politicians, there are teachers, there are some parents that's active in their children's life, but on the collective level...there's an absence. So therefore, father absence creates a void. Or a vacuum in the way we understand ourselves. So therefore, we don't know how we should act, we don't know how we should think as black men. And this is why our misunderstanding causes us to become vicious because we have no identity. Number one, the identity that we attach ourselves to, our street identities.*

In addition, the focus group participants expressed the view that fathers have an important role in modeling how boys should act as responsible men. However, when the father is absent, it was their view that boys and young adult males are less likely to be exposed on a consistent basis to responsible male role models:

Sinclair: *But in terms of the relationship thing, if a man does not know who he is, you don't know how you should be acting toward this woman, number one. And if a woman does not know who she is, then those distortions cause you to act in certain ways. That's basically counterproductive to both.*

Ineffective Communication and Lack of Conflict Resolution Skills

Effective and mutual communication were regarded by the focus group participants to be an important feature of healthy and stable relationships. Subsequently, they listed and discussed how ineffective communication facilitated and enhanced conflict between romantic partners. For example:

Soul: *When I think about communication. We can have communication. But based off the communication that we have is that sometimes a man can tend to shut down. I'm still communicating with you. It's just my way of communicating.*

There was also a tendency among the focus group participants to associate ineffective communication and lack of conflict resolution skills with the lack of exposure to healthy male/female relations. As such, these men expressed the view that when you don't grow up witnessing men and women navigating conflict without verbal abuse and physical violence, a boy is less likely to grow into an adult man who knows how to employ effective conflict resolution skills in romantic relationships with females:

Remi: *I mean, a lot of us aren't aware of how to play our roles properly in a relationship. I mean, everybody wants to be loved. Everyone seeks love and seeks the right partner. But not many of us know how to play our roles specifically in the relationship and how they coincide.*

Importation of Street Identities into Romantic Relationships

For many African American males, particularly those who reside in disadvantaged and working-class neighborhoods, “the streets” is a major site for gender socialization and learning values, norms, and behaviors associated with the unique representation and enactment of masculinity that is commonly enacted by African American males who reside in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Anderson, 1999; Oliver, 2006). Moreover, Oliver (2006) has described “the streets” as an alternative socialization institution, that functions similar to the family, the educational system and mass media with regard to black male gender socialization. Several of the focus group participants discussed how the importation of street identities, values, and behaviors into romantic relationships contribute to conflict between romantic partners. For example:

Remi: *When I was growing up, we had nicknames like Scarface, Nitty, Gangster. This gangster that killer little money. So, all our names are equated to what we can conceive as valuable. But those are usually destructive identities. And what we tend to do is lift out those identities in our behavior, and that in turn is externalized in the way we handle our relationships with our women...*

The focus group participants also discussed how in neighborhoods where father absence is prevalent, boys are likely to identify with street-oriented men as their male role models:

Sinclair: *We also do not know how to deal with difficulty. We've never been taught how to deal with difficulty. Nobody is teaching us these things. We have to be made new because we've been broken all the way down. And now we're being shaped and molded by all of the wrong things and now you're getting all of the wrong results. We're not getting shaped and molded in the house most of the time. Because a lot of the times the person who would normally be shaping and molding us, which would be our father, is not in the home.*

Furthermore, the focus group participants discussed in detail how a man's street involvement contributes to relationship conflict with their female partners. For example:

Remi: *A lot of us want to get out here in the streets and get to get the trap [i.e., the place where drugs are sold and/or used]. And we want to sell a little something. We want to hang out on the block with the guys. We don't want to go out there and get a 9 to 5. We look down and talk down about the brothers that's doing that. And nine times out of ten she going to go to work? You know what I mean? She's going to take the 9 to 5 and most likely go to school or something as well and further her education. While we are complacent... stuck in the same place that also causing a disconnect in the household. Now you are not present at home. She got a problem with that. You're not physically present, you're not emotionally present... You're not psychologically present, you're not there for her spiritually because if you're out there in the streets how are you keeping a balance with your spirituality and the woman.*

Factors and Circumstances that Lead Black Men to Commit Acts of Violence Against their Female Partners

Dobash and Dobash (1984, 1998) were early pioneers in interviewing battered women and batterers for the purpose of gaining an understanding of how individuals with known histories of involvement in acts of intimate partner violence described the sources of conflict that contributed to their involvement in intimate partner violence. For example, they found that some of the major sources of relationship conflict leading to acts of intimate partner violence perpetrated by men against their wives or girlfriends included: sexual refusal, possessiveness and jealousy, money, disputes related to childrearing, arguments about relatives, and the woman's attempt to terminate and leave the relationship. Similarly, the SOS focus group interview discussion guide sought to uncover how black men residing in inner-city Milwaukee identified and described the factors and circumstances that lead black men, who have similar experiences to their own, to commit acts of violence against their female romantic partners. The primary thematic findings emerged from the exploration of this question included:

- Witnessing Violence as Conflict Resolution as a Child
- Jealousy/Disloyal Acts

- Frustrated Black Men
- Male Dominance and Control
- Ineffective Communication and Male Dominance
- Unstable Manhood and Conflict with the Independent Woman
- Self-Defense

Contrasting View

Violence and Trauma Associated with Mother's Abuse of Sons

Witnessing Violence as Conflict Resolution as a Child

Straus and Gelles (1995) estimate that upwards of 10 million children under age 18 witness violence between their parents each year. Several participants reported that many men learn early on in their experiences within their immediate and extended families that relationship conflict, including intimate partner violence was normal. As a result, it was their view it is not uncommon for boys exposed to intimate partner violence as children and adolescents to adopt violence as a means of resolving romantic conflicts when they become adults. For example:

Nemo: *Especially when you come from a situation where your father beat your mother. It's learned behavior, you know. So, I totally see how it happened... This is the way they used to kick it*

and fight and he used to beat my mother and so now my woman get out of line. I'm going to smack her around too.

ThoBack: *One of my cousins grew up in the same house as my aunt's boyfriend. And he used to be violent and called her out of her name. So, what do you think is going to happen? The son sees that, and he goes, 'Well I am going to do the same thing... So I said, 'Cuz, 'why you doing that?', He said, 'Shoot, I see what my Mom's boyfriend did and it seemed like it worked for her and for him. So, it must work. It's going to work for me. But he don't do that anymore though. But he used to be bad with that matter.*

Jealousy and Unfaithfulness

Issues and behaviors related to a female partner's imagined or actual emotional or sexual unfaithfulness have long been established as a factor leading men and women to become involved in conflicts that culminate in violence against female romantic partners (Dobash & Dobash, 1984, 1998; Hattery, 2008). For example:

ThoBack: *A lot of it comes from jealousy. Being insecure with themselves. Which goes back to what brother Soul said. You have got to love yourself before you can love anybody else.*

Moses: *Mistrust. She can't be trusted, and that's something that's hard, you know...I don't know how a person would react If somebody that he loved and cared for did so many things to*

him, when he thought that they were there for him, and he felt that they were that person... I love you with all my heart and found out in reality that you were laughing behind my back. You know what I'm saying? He was like he was sucker... That's the frustration that it's hard to control. You feel that you've been done wrong, and you give everything that it takes. I suppose it's hard for a man to deal with that. Not saying he wants to do that [i.e., engage in violence]. It depends on how he's raised, but then it's still it's hard on the individual...

Facilitator: How would you summarize that in one sentence? What you're saying is that one of one thing that causes men to be violent towards their partners is mistrust when they find out that they've been lied to, deceived in some way.

Moses: *I would say basically because he done the same thing. But now that it's happened to him. But then it doesn't have to be that way. You could be a good guy. You could be a good guy. You could just snap off. Now, I'm crazy. I went insane for a minute because my heart was broken, and I just couldn't think because I couldn't believe she did this to me and I just went insane.*

Male Dominance and Control

Historically, domestic violence service providers and researchers have identified and described how a man's pursuit of power and control in a romantic relationship is a major feature of intimate partner violence (Pence & McMahon, 1997). More specifically, it is generally recognized and has been

consistently documented that when batterers, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, sexual preference, or income), commit acts of domestic violence they are often motivated by a desire to dominate and control their intimate romantic partners (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Ptacek, 1988; Straus & Gelles, 1995). Consistent with this fundamental understanding of one major aspect of the motivation of batterers and the interpersonal dynamics of domestic violence encounters (Dobash & Dobash, 1984), the S.O. S. focus group participants made a distinction between how a desire to achieve male dominance and control in an intimate relationship may contribute to relationship conflict and how it may also lead men to commit acts of violence against their female partners. Actually, the men described male dominance and control as being manifested along a violence continuum. That is, on the low end of the continuum male dominance and control served as a catalyst for non-violent conflict and arguments between romantic partners. While, on the high end of the continuum the desire to impose male dominance and control was perceived to have the potential to lead to acts of violence against female partners. For example:

Facilitator: When brothers commit acts of violence against their partners in the community, what motivates them to do that?

Nemo: *I think it's control. Like I can control her physically because there's really no competition. If you look at a man, you look at a woman, it's not like when there's two brothers line up and say we're going to get this on. You are evaluating them as potential, they can be a threat to you. But, with men and women, it's like there's no fight there. It's like it's a control thing. You want to control*

this woman. She's not doing things that you want her to do. So, I'm going to physically put my hands on you and force you to do what I want you to do. That's just my opinion, control.

In response to the previous focus group participant, JR who was in the same focus group supported Nemo's characterization of the role that the desire to dominate and control women plays in leading men to commit acts of domestic violence against their romantic partners with a personal account:

Jay: *I have to agree with that one because I have done that myself in the past when I wanted to control my wife. And I lashed out by beating her, put my hands on her, which I shouldn't have done. You know what I'm saying? But I did. You know what I'm saying. Maybe because of my ego, I don't know. But I did it. You know, I'm saying so. I agree. That had a whole lot to do with me wanting to control her.*

Ineffective Communication and Male Dominance

A major indicator of a problematic intimate relationship is the lack of communication and/or ineffective communication. Indeed, there is an evolving body of research that suggest that batterers tend to be deficient at argumentative expression (Dutton, 1987) and tend to perceive their partners comfort and ease at argumentative expression as constituting a verbal attack and/or threat to their manhood (Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993). Consistent with prior research the SOS participants identified and described how a man's inability to effectively communicate functioned to compound and escalate

relationship conflict. In addition, the focus group participants regarded ineffective communication as a factor that has the potential to lead a man to engage in acts of violence against his female partner. In discussing ineffective communication as a factor contributing to domestic violence, focus group participants tended to describe scenarios of encounters between black men and women where a male's inability to verbally gain compliance from his wife or girlfriend in an argument may lead him to commit acts of violence as a way to dominate and control his romantic partner. For example:

Facilitator: What are the factors that are most likely to lead a man to commit an act of violence against his female partner?

Sinclair: *Lack of communication... And I see that's a big problem, even in my past relationship, that I feel that the woman should be listening to me. And sometimes she's challenging. So, when I'm trying to express my point, I expect her to listen and accept what I'm saying. But yet she gets just as loud because she wants me to accept what she's saying... Then that's going to cause a conflict. And sooner or later, the male is going to get mad... And next thing you know our voice increases and when she's not listening, next thing you know, either he is slapping her in the mouth or he physically making her shut up and we ain't trying to hear it. And that's part of some of the problems that we haven't as black men is that we already have existing anger, but we don't know how to communicate with our spouses.*

Furthermore, in discussing ineffective communication and domestic violence focus group participants tended to associate the decision to engage in violence against one's female partner as being related to a man's intense desire to impose his will and to control his female romantic partner:

Facilitator: What are some of the major sources of conflict between black men and women?

Sinclair: *And this is one of the number one contributor to domestic violence because they don't know how to seek conflict resolution. They don't know how to talk to one another. The man automatically thinks, 'well, I'm the man shut up. You do what I tell you. I wear the pants, You're going to do what I say.' So therefore, forcing a woman to have a subservient role, but her not knowing who she is, sometimes challenges that and stands up to the man. And the man feels that's a challenge and they go to physical violence.*

Phynox: *Based on what we're referring to, with the man violence, trying to keep control over a situation or keep a person from leaving, want to be in control? This is the way of life. The way it's supposed to be is that she's supposed to do this is the way...*

Unstable Manhood and Conflict with the Independent

The value of men, indeed the respect for men in society, is often centered on their perceived ability to provide for and protect their actual or future romantic partners and/or their children (Franklin, 2012; Kimmel, 2005). Indeed, a major trigger leading to conflict among men and women involved in a

romantic relationship has been found to be circumstances in which a woman criticizes or complains about her partner's failure to meet her economic and material expectations (Smith, 2008). Consistent with this cultural expectation, focus group participants were very sensitive to how a man's inferior economic standing generally and relative to the economic standing of a female partner had the potential to lead to relationship conflict and to intimate partner violence. In addition, some of the focus group participants expressed the view that black women are given greater access to education and economic opportunities than are black men, which results in relationship power imbalances and a source of frustration for both black men and women. For example:

ThoBack: *A lot of brothers commit acts of violence against women because they are financially unstable and want to be dominant...She had worked all day and you [the man] at home playing PlayStation. Then she come home fussing and saying stuff to you and now you want to get violent but you ain't got no job because it's supposed to be a partnership...*

Moses: *And once she started accomplishing things, you start to see that she really don't need you. The thing that you thought was important to her, she really don't need that because she starts needing you less. The thing that you used to do that you thought was so important is less important to her...You mad at her because she's seeking more and more and you're becoming more and more dominant you ain't because she's seeking...The black woman can find herself in places that they would never allow a black man to be.*

The participant (Soul) quoted immediately below describes a situation following a period of imprisonment in which he was dependent on his girlfriend, and how he was irresponsible and very unreasonable in response to his girlfriend's annoyance about his failure to meet her expectations. During the focus group, many years following the incident he describes, he recognizes that he was both unstable and unreasonable in his response to his girlfriend:

Soul: *I noticed in my personal experiences that it came at moments where, say for example, I take the car and I don't come pick her up. She would be yelling and cussing me out you know... My irresponsibility became ways for her to show acts of violence because at the same time it goes back to the lack of communication. I wasn't hearing her when she was saying something. I was being irresponsible and I'm like, 'shut up, I don't want to hear this.' I don't know what it is, I just shut down. She yelling, getting on my nerves, you know. I am not saying that I would hit her. But this is like the more nagging being in my ear, now you're making me mad... I [said to her] I came to get you and I was late. But I came to get you. And she says, I'm just sitting out here for an hour. And I say, shut up, I'm here...Not knowing that I am in her car. That I am driving to her house nine times out of ten she was with me when I first came home from prison. Like I was driving her car. I was staying at her house is like I'm really living off of her. But at the same time... Like I'm thinking, but I'm having sex with you, so why are you tripping? This is my payment back to you. You are able to lay up with me and I am a top dude.*

Facilitator: What do you think about your mentality, the orientation of doing manhood at this time?

Soul: *Terrible.*

Facilitator: Why was it terrible?

Soul: *Because for one, I was not responsible for myself. Two, I was allowing somebody else to dictate how I was going to live my life based off what they bring to the table and how they allowed me to use their materialistic things, and for me not to really be wanting more for myself. At that time, I didn't want more for me. I was just at a standstill. I felt that I was content at that moment. Why do I have to go get a job when she takes care of the bills?*

The Frustrated Black Man

Earlier in this review of findings, black male frustration was discussed as a source of relationship conflict. Here the focus is on black male frustration as a catalyst for perpetuating acts of violence against the female romantic partners of black males. The SOS focus group participants offered a nuanced description of how black male frustration was associated with romantic interpersonal conflict and intimate partner violence. In a prior section of this report, I reported accounts of how the focus group participants described how black male frustration is associated with romantic conflict generally. Here, the focus is on how black male frustration may lead to acts of intimate partner violence. This distinction

is possible because the focus group participants described how a man's frustration may precipitate conflict in the relationship and how a man's frustration may lead to actual acts of violence against his partner. The two most common sources of frustration were (1) the man not being able to meet his personal financial expectations associated with being the man in the relationship and (2) not being able to withstand his partner's verbal criticism regarding his failure to meet her financial or other expectations of him. For example:

Remi: *You know, just dissatisfaction in general with yourself that I believe is the main cause for a man becoming violent with his with his significant other. I mean, it's not that she doesn't necessarily have to do anything to bring arise out of this individual. But I mean, the stress on you from your day, you know. You come home with that on you. And most of us don't talk much talk about our feelings. So, I mean, now I'm I mean, I'm at home. Yeah. I love you and, and I mean, I may not have anything here stressing me out at the moment, but I still have a stressful day on my shoulders, and it could be something as small as you you're not making my food the way I wanted and now I'm irritable already. So, I spazz out and crush your face. It's often situations like that...*

Several focus group participants described scenarios in which a man's perception of their female partner's unrelenting verbal criticism (nagging) had the potential to result in the man's use of violence to put an end to her verbal assertiveness. In situations like this the man resulting to

violence was, according to the participants motivated by a desire to stop the criticism and also to establish male dominance:

ThoBack: *I just want to say a lot of acts of violence against women result from her verbalizations. You know, it's constantly nagging... Sometimes women just don't get it. You understand. They carry on and on. And that's how it all escalates into the fight because it starts with the mouth, the verbal and messing with your menta. Like I said. I'm a firm believer of communication. And like Jay said, that we have to communicate. I mean, I'm not saying I'm all good because I have arguments sometimes, you know, I get frustrated, but I don't believe put my hand on anybody.*

Violence and Trauma Associated with Mother's Abuse of Sons/ A Contrasting Thematic Finding

The term contrasting thematic finding is used in this analysis to denote the coding of themes in which a focus group participant or minority of focus group participants expressed views in opposition to the general direction of the participants' responses to a particular question or discussion of a particular issue. While there was not general consensus among focus group participants that trauma resulting from exposure to emotional and physical abuse perpetrated by one's mother could lead a man to commit

acts of domestic violence, focus group participants did not offer any objections to this causal explanation. Essentially, it was suggested and accepted that exposure to emotional and physical abuse during childhood had the potential to lead males to commit acts of violence against their female partners. For example:

Soul: *One is that as a youth I noticed that we are introduced to abuse so young. You get taught like at about five years old. And sometimes the mother is the one who was in the household. She's the one who was going off. And it comes up that you grew up with like a trauma that comes from your mother. And your mother be the one look just like the woman that you have been involved with. So, I view it as we get adapted to and become de-sensitized to the beatings and the abuse so young that when we get older and the person who's not our mother but is a significant other. 'You ain't my mother', you know what I mean? Like you're not going to hold that. So, it's like a lot of the trauma that I know that I have seen through some of the work I have been in is that it came from a lot of the mothers... Mothers are causing more trauma in life than anyone else in the community. She will say things like... 'You look just like your father and he ain't shit.' So, when we get involved in a relationship and that partner says certain things, it reminds us of our mother. So now we resort back to the anger and that inner child comes out and now we can whoop her ass because she is like our mom.*

When Women Commit Acts of Violence Against their Male Partners

According to the National Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault Survey (Black et al. 2011) black men self-report higher rates domestic violence victimization than men of other races and ethnicities. In addition, when compared to men of other races and ethnicities, black men are more likely than are men of other races, to become a victim of domestic homicide perpetrated by their female partners (Violence Policy Center, 2020). As such, we sought to uncover the SOS focus group participants' views regarding the circumstances that may lead black women to commit acts of violence against their male romantic partners. The following thematic findings emerged in the focus group discussion of this area of inquiry:

- Self-Defense and Retaliation
- Argumentative, Aggressive, and Acting Like a Man
- Protecting Children from an Abusive Partner

Self-Defense

One of the most common reasons women who have been arrested for domestic violence give to justify engaging in violent acts against their male romantic partners is self-defense (Makepeace 1966; Stuart et. al. 2006). Consistent with prior research on women who commit violent acts against their male partners, several SOS focus group participants reported that women will sometimes resort to violence against their male partners in retaliation for emotionally abusing them or committing acts of violence against them. Moreover, they noted that sometimes women will commit acts of violence against male

romantic partners in anticipation of the man seeking to engage in acts of violence against them in a particular encounter. For example:

Remi: *I would have to say fear, fear of her man could be one reason that women commit acts of violence against men.*

Facilitator: *Could you give me an example?*

Remi: *So, let's say this woman has a history of domestic abuse, being on the receiving end of it. And not even necessarily with her current relationship partner. But she's experienced this, that's traumatizing. I mean, something as simple as his tone can be just enough to make her click. And before you know it, she went from washing dishes to putting a knife in his chest. I mean, it was her fear. It was a defense mechanism. She expected based on your tone. She's used to this this other man. That being, you know, the indicator of him getting abusive, him getting physical.*

Phynox: *Women getting tired... women being tired ... and they finally fought back, or they saw a potential danger. And so, you never know what relapsed from maybe a childhood event. Maybe seeing Mom getting abused. And then so something triggers that thought to say, 'You know what, I'm going to get him before he gets me.'*

Argumentative, Aggressive, and Acting Like a Man

Some participants expressed the view that black women who are argumentative and aggressive may actually initiate acts of violence against their male partners. This observation was addressed separate and distinct from violent encounters in which women were described as acting in self-defense. As such, it was the view of some of the participants that some women are prone to act in an aggressive and violent manner toward their male partners as their means of managing relationship conflict. Among participants who expressed this view they characterized women who were assertive, aggressive, and violent as “acting like a man.” For example:

Zay: *I grew up in a house where women were attacking men...*

Sinclair: *I think it is also could be one of the cases too, of her copying her man. Like a lot of times, you have women that's running up trying to be like her man, doing the same thing he's doing. So therefore, she's taking on his mindset too. So just as he is abusive, she is too. These days you see women killing their boyfriend. That's real. So, when a woman don't know really who she is and she have a dude, they live a certain lifestyle in a certain way, that rubs off. So, she began to mimic those same characteristics and thinking, So she just becomes just as violent too!*

Aggressive non-violent gestures were also described as signs that a man should be aware of in order to avoid being physically assaulted by a female romantic partner:

ThoBack. *A lot of time, like Soul said that they do all the hand gestures which ultimately make you go on defense mode. Because some women, like I said, some women will lash out at you, even though they talk with their hands. They'll get close enough to you where they're almost physically touching, and you got to restrain them. She get to close to my area, all in my space... So, get up out of my face because you're making me feel like you want to do something to me, you know.*

Protecting Children from an Abusive Partner

As noted above, it is common for children who witness domestic violence to also become victims of abuse perpetrated by their fathers or mother's male romantic partners (Straus & Gelles, 1995). Moreover, it has been found that a major factor contributing to an abused woman's decision to terminate and leave an abusive relationship is when her abuser begins to target her children with abuse (Taylor, 2002). Consistent with this finding, the SOS focus group participants identified scenarios in which women might resort to violence against her male romantic partner to protect her children from emotional and/or physical abuse:

JR: *To answer your question more directly, I feel that, you know, if your partner or a female comes in and sees you disciplining her son or children for that matter, in a bad way, or maybe even doing something sexual with one of your kids, that would be, you know, a reason for, you know, a female, in my opinion, to react with violence immediately.*

Social Media, Relationship Conflict, and Domestic Violence

According to the Pew Research Center (2021), seven-in-ten Americans say they routinely use some type of social media site (e.g., FaceBook, TikTok, Instagram, SnapChat, etc.). Hence, social media use has evolved into a central feature of the lifestyles of many Americans with regard to information consumption, entertainment, and social interaction. As such, the SOS focus group interview discussion guide was designed to include a question that sought to uncover how black men who reside in inner-city neighborhoods perceive the influence of social media on relationship conflict and domestic violence among African Americans. The specific question posed was: “What role, if any, do social media postings and use of social media play in relationship conflict and domestic violence among people residing in your community?” This question generated a great deal of discussion among the focus group participants. The responses to the question also extended to discussion of how rap and hip-hop cultural products, artist personas, and messages represented in the art form and disseminated via social media contribute to relationship conflict. In response to this question, participants spoke to social media generally and to rap and hip-hop culture as content that that was specifically accessed through social media. Some respondents expressed the view that social media generates conflict between romantic

partners by promoting unrealistic financial and material accumulation expectations. The following thematic findings emerged in participant's responses to the question examining the association between social media use, relationship conflict, and domestic violence:

- Partners Use social media to Facilitate Romantic Communication with Others
- Social Media Promotes Problematic Displays of Male and Female Roles

Partner's Use of social media to Facilitate Romantic Communication with Others

The focus group participants identified and discussed scenarios in which both men and women would use various social media formats, for example, FaceBook, e-mail, TikTok, and Instagram, to communicate with other males or females. These communications were deemed problematic because they involved romantic messages and sometimes photos displaying sexual content. For example:

Ant: *Like everybody has said before, social media is now shaping how society is shaping you to have to be "that person." And if you're not that person, the average black female in my community, they're going to be fly. They're going to go and they're going to find every reason to be fly... That's really what it's about right now. Money and social status is tearing our families apart. Right now, everybody's so focused on how to get ahead and they're knocking everybody... Everybody so focused on getting ahead. Even competition between you and your*

woman. That' can't be healthy. That's going to cause conflict anyway. When you come home, and you tell your woman I make \$23.00 an hour. She comes home and she tell you I make \$25.00 an hour. Now, just because she made \$25, you make \$23 don't mean shit...Excuse me... That money doesn't mean nothing. You know what I'm saying? So that's what I think is what make women or not even just women, just as a black people fight in households.

In addition, some respondents expressed the view that social media functions to facilitate a broad range of social experiences and understandings contributing to interpersonal conflict. For example:

JR: *And I think it [social media] has a huge role in/and how people deal with conflict, understand conflict, b around it, and resolve it.*

One of ways in which participants specifically discussed social media and relationship conflict had to do with romantic partners using various forms of social media to communicate with other potential or additional actual romantic partners. For example:

Unidentified Participant: *Social media is used to cheat in a relationship.*

ThoBack: *As a people, a lot of that [conflict] come from in the social media world as, as they call a DM and hits in the in-box. I was telling this brother one time, I said, 'You know, they don't get phone numbers... they get the brother's e-mail?' Because you see some of us are illiterate to working on the computers. And then you find out how did this [relationship outside of the primary*

relationship] go down. And you find out they have been using e-mail the whole time, you know. And it's all social media. From Tiktok, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram. But social media is really destroying their relationship.

Exposure to Negative Images and Messages in African American Popular Culture/Rap and Hip-Hop

In response to the question that sought to uncover how focus group participants perceived how the use of social media contributes to relationship conflict and violence among intimate partners, the SOS focus group participants engaged in some lengthy discussion of how some of the lyrics, messaging, and representations of male and female identities in rap and Hip-Hop culture hinders the development of healthy male/female relationships. Over the course of the past thirty years rap and hip-hop songs, videos, films and other modes of the art forms expression and dissemination have been the predominate source of contemporary African American popular culture (Kitwana, 2002; Neal, 2002). Additionally, in recent years an evolving number of community activists, as well as rap and Hip-Hop culture commentators have expressed concerns that some rap and Hip-Hop cultural products tend to promote negative images of African American males and females and encourage a broad range of problematic behaviors, including conflict-ridden interpersonal relations between African American males and females (Morgan, 1999; Stephens & Few; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Pough, 2004)). Furthermore, Oliver (2007) has suggested that Hip Hop culture functions as an alternative site of gender

role socialization, offering an easily accessible culture-specific location to witness and emulate uniquely urban styles of gender role enactment rooted in the experiences of marginalized African Americans, as well as those who have transcended low-income status as manifested in flamboyant displays of material accumulation. Consequently, it was not surprising to find that the focus group participants had a lot to say about how exposure to some of the lyrical and visual content, and messages conveyed in rap and Hip-Hop culture contributes to relationship conflict and intimate partner violence. For example:

Sinclair: *I think that our society has conditioned and programmed us and our culture to be other than who we really are. When it comes to our women, they identify with what they see on media and media platforms and in rap music videos and different things like that. That they should be sex symbols, that they measure and value their body and not intelligence, but by their body size and types. So therefore, they emulate a particular culture that teaches them that they value their body. So therefore, very little has anything to do with their intelligence. So, when you have women that live that way, then that's the way they're going to live their culture as well. And they bring that into the family. So, there is no particular value that they can attach to themselves other than what the street gave them as an identity.*

It was the view of some of the focus group participants that social media and particularly rap and Hip-Hop culture was problematic because it encouraged both males and females to act in ways that are in opposition to traditional gender role expectations:

Mo: *And it's [social media] not teaching them how to be proper women. It's not teaching them, like we talked about earlier, the clearly defined roles. It's not teaching them that. Same thing with the men. We are learning how from social media. From a music video from, and from the streets....And naturally that causes that causes conflict.*

Justifying Violence Against Women

Domestic violence service delivery providers and researchers have historically sought to understand how men justify resorting to violence against women (Dobash & Dobash, 1984, 1998; Ptacek, 1988; Pence & McMahon, 1997). Furthermore, research examining batterers motives and justifications suggest that men who commit violence against their female partners may internalize and express multiple justifications. Given that the SOS focus group discussion guide included a prior question crafted to uncover how black men perceive sources of conflict, only one major justification was offered by the SOS participants that was distinct from their discussion of factors that contribute to relationship conflict. Hence, it is important to note that the SOS participants shared the view that sources of relationship conflict are also commonly relied on to justify perpetrating acts of violence against one's female partner or lead to acts of intimate partner violence. Regarding the focus group participants responses to the

discussion question focused specifically on how men justify or make sense out of resorting to violence against their female partners, the following thematic finding emerged:

- Pursuit of Male Dominance and Control

Pursuit of Male Dominance and Control

Earlier in this review of the SOS thematic findings there was discussion of male dominance and control as a factor that SOS participants believed has the potential to lead black men to commit acts of intimate partner violence. Here the emphasis is on the SOS participants discussion of how the pursuit of male dominance may be used to justify or make sense out of engaging in acts of violence against one's wife or girlfriend. Domestic violence service providers and researchers have consistently reported that men who batter their female partners are often motivated by a desire to control them. For example, Hamberger et. al. (1994) interviewed men arrested for domestic violence prior to their participation in court ordered Batterers Intervention Programs (BIP's) and found that the most common reasons they provided for perpetrating intimate partner violence were power and control manifested as assertions of dominance, control of female partner's behavior and punishment of women for what they defined as rule violating behavior. Among the SOS focus group participants there was significant consensus in their view that men often resort to violence against their wives and girlfriends as a means of imposing their dominance and control over them. What is significant about this finding is that these men specified that when men are involved in an intimate sexual relationship with a woman, that they tend to believe that

the woman belongs to them and that as a result of that intimate romantic connection that they have a right to use violence to resolve relationship conflict. For example:

Remi: *Now I heard it a lot, Man, 'This is my woman. This is my baby. I got kids with her. You ain't got the right to speak on my relationship because you don't know what I do. You don't know my situation.'*

Doc: So, it's about the woman as property.

Remi: *Yes, sir. It's simple. I'm her man and that's my woman. And especially don't let them have kids or be married...*

Sinclair: *And one thing that the brother said about possession when I was a pimp, women was property and therefore, you know, using violence as a means to control them was a part of that culture back then. That's what we used to justify our actions towards them. And the same thing with how we do it in the streets sometimes when our women are talking back, we slap them. And that's okay because we're still coming under that understanding that that's how we correct things by hitting. We've never learned how to resolve conflict with talking.*

Participants also described how religious teachings regarding an expectation that the man should be dominant in the male/female relationship contribute to shared narratives that justify violence against female romantic partners:

Mike: *it's been talk that a man is the head of the house, which makes him think he's the master, and he's the boss of everyone. So, it justifies being head of the house, being master, so he demand for her to obey him as well.*

Consequences of Violence Against Women

Domestic violence has been found to give rise to a broad range of long-term and short-term consequences for victims, family members of victims, batterers, and members of the larger society ([Office on Women's Health \(womenshealth.gov\)](https://www.womenshealth.gov)). For example, it is well documented that victims of domestic violence often experience mental health, health, and economic challenges. What is missing in the research in the field of domestic violence is examination of how batterers, and more specifically men at-risk of engaging in acts of domestic violence, perceive the consequences of domestic violence. To address this gap in the research on domestic violence, the SOS focus group interview discussion guide included a question that was crafted to uncover how African American men understand and recognize the consequences of domestic violence in the communities in which they reside. The SOS focus group participants addressed in detail several consequences, including:

- Arrest and Charged with a Crime

- Children Learn that Violence is a Normal Way to Resolve Conflict/Negative Impact on Children Exposed to Domestic Violence
- Violent Defense of a Victimized Relative or Friend
- Termination of Relationship
- Violent Retaliation Against the Abuser
- Defense of a Relative or Friend/Community Violence

Arrest and Charged with a Crime

There was general consensus among the focus group participants that engaging in acts of physical violence against one's wife or girlfriend had a great potential to result in a man being arrested and formally processed by the criminal justice system. For example:

Nemo: *What's bigger than the consequences of you going to prison?*

A few of the focus group participants provided detailed descriptions of having contact with law enforcement, being arrested, and removed from their residence as a consequence of the formal intervention of law enforcement and the criminal justice system in their disputes with their romantic partners. For example:

ThoBack: *And so, you know, the more you put your hands on one [a woman] and they stand in front of the Judge, the judge is you going to jail. Or she she's going to pop (hit) you, and she*

going to be at the crib on probation because they're going to say you provoked it... Because my children's mother committed an act of violence on me. And they took me up out of the house, took me to jail. Let me spend 8 hours down there. Put some bandages on me, and I had to walk all the way back to the house... And then they said, 'You can't stay there tonight. You got to find somewhere to stay.' I still had to bail myself out.

Children Learn that Violence is a Normal Way to Resolve Relationship Conflicts

Most children are first exposed to violence in their household of origin or in the households of extended family or friends (Straus & Gelles, 1995). Furthermore, children are frequently directly involved in domestic violence incidents, either as witnesses, victims, or perpetrators of acts of retaliatory violence abusive men in defense of their abused mothers or female family members (Fantuzzo, Boruch, Beriama, Atkins, & Marcus, 1997). Consistent with what is generally known about children and early exposure to domestic violence, the SOS focus group participants suggested that when children are exposed to violent acts occurring among their parents or other romantic partners in their family or extended family network, they learn at an early age that violence is a common feature of conflict resolution among adults involved in romantic relationships. For example:

Remi: *I would say a major consequence is a generational curse. When it's done around the children, whether they see it or not, even if they just hear it, they begin it becomes familiar...with violence. It gets too familiar to them. It becomes normal. Yes. And that becomes the way that they deal with things as they grow up.*

Focus group participants also discussed how early exposure to domestic violence among romantic partners could serve to desensitize individuals and prime them to be willing to resort to violence against others outside the family or romantic relationship. For example:

Nemo: *Or there's kids involved with the damage you doing to that person. That's what 's huge. You are doing physical damage, emotional damage, spiritual damage, and damage on every single level. And a kid is sitting there watching you do that. And now that goes to learned behavior again. So now as soon as he gets his first girlfriend. I did 10.5 years, went in as a juvenile. And so, it's like, man, you can get predisposed to violence, you know what I mean? And that's the way you see the world as a violent place.*

Some focus group participants were also sensitive to how a household disrupted by intimate partner violence and related consequences (e.g., relationship disruption, unemployment, homelessness) that disrupt the stability of the family could result in children being removed from their parents by state child protection agencies. For example:

Phynox: *Now we have children possibly involved being misplaced or institutionalized to something totally different. So now here's the breeding of another violent situation, not knowing what they're getting involved in. They're not at home with a parent, but with an adoptive family, not knowing what that outcome is breeding.*

Violent Defense of a Relative or Friend

In a study of black men who reported having a history of involvement in violent confrontations between themselves and other black men in street-corner settings, Oliver (1998) found that a major justification that they provided to justify resorting to violence against other men was their claim that they resorted to violence as a result of coming to the defense of a female relative or friend who had been disrespected or physically abused by their male romantic partner. Similarly, some of the SOS focus group participants identified and discussed that a significant consequence of domestic violence includes men becoming involved in violent confrontations precipitated by internalizing an obligation to come to the defense of a female relative or friend who has been abused by her boyfriend or husband. For example:

Ant: *And another consequence would be the "pull up." For instance, the pull up, let's say your significant other, or your sister, and somebody say that a man put their hands on them. What you're going to do, pull up. You ain't even thinking about [it]. You're not thinking about, 'Hey, I'm about to go to jail.' What you are thinking about is, 'Who over there?' 'How many over there?' I'm pulling around the corner and I'm knocking you out, you know what I'm saying?*

The men in the focus groups commonly used the phrase “the pull up,” or “to pull up” to refer to situations in which one individual confronts another individual in an aggressive manner as a result of the confronted individual being perceived to have engaged in some type of problematic behavior (e.g., verbal abuse, disrespect, and threats of violence) regarded as a social rule violation that warrants verbal and/or physical chastisement. In this portion of the discussion, there was a general consensus among the focus group participants that it is not uncommon for men who resided in the neighborhoods in which they resided to “pull up” on men who had physically abused females to whom they were related (e.g., their sisters, cousins, aunts, daughters, current or former wives or girlfriends, or friends).

Self-Defense and Retaliation

Black men report higher rates of life-time exposure to domestic violence compared to men of other races (National Center for Health Statistics, 2021). Some researchers have sought to explain this based on the findings that black women self-report higher rates of experiencing acts of severe domestic violence compared to women of other races (Straus & Gelles, 1995). In addition, black women experience higher rates of domestic homicide compared to women of other races (Violence Policy Center, 2021). Hence, it was not unexpected that the SOS focus group participants would identify and describe scenarios in which women committed or would commit acts of retaliatory violence against their abusers in response to their victimization. For example:

Phynox: *Retaliation perpetrated by the woman. Okay. Based on the fact that it's enough... Okay? I can recall a situation year back where warning signs wasn't being seen, but then the end results was that it was death. The person did receive punishment for that. Did it lead up to that point?*

Phynox went on to elaborate on how the mind set of modern women have changed with regard to being willing to tolerate physical abuse:

Phynox: *There are women that beat their men. It's not a funny situation... Women are becoming more dominant to the point of saying it's not going to happen to me. It is not going to happen no more. I'm done. Enough is enough. And that's being promoted amongst, you know, especially women in power. No. You're not allowing the man to destroy what you're trying to do. So, she's going to defend, you know, the children. She's going to I mean, she's going to defend the children, you know, if there's danger being brought presented to the household.*

Remi: *So, let's say this woman has a history of domestic abuse, being on the receiving end of it. And not even necessarily with her current relationship partner. But she's experienced this, that's traumatizing. I mean, something as simple as his tone can be just enough to make her click. And before you know it, she went from washing dishes to putting a knife in his chest. That's true. I mean, it was her fear. It was a defense mechanism. She expected based on your tone. She's used to this this other man...getting abusive, him getting physical.*

Termination of the Relationship

Intimate partner violence is a leading factor contributing to a woman's decision to leave and end an abusive romantic relationship. Indeed, it has been reported that women are most at risk of experiencing intimate partner violence, including domestic homicide when they announce their intent to terminate the relationship (Nicholas, et. al, 2003; Taylor, 2002). For example:

Sinclair: *Another consequence is break up. Like I know situations where a man hit a woman and that was it. All it took is one time she left, the woman moved away, another city. So, one consequence would be you lose your relationship Somebody that you really cared about, but you handle that wrong*

Black Men on Domestic Violence Prevention

A major goal of the SOS project is to serve as a catalyst for the prevention and reduction of domestic violence and community violence in Milwaukee. Consistent with this goal, the SOS focus group interview schedule included a question designed to elicit the views and suggestions of inner-city African-American men regarding what actions they believe should be taken to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic violence in the communities in which they reside. In response to this question

there was a very rich discussion in which the focus group participants offered a number of suggestions, including:

- Include more Positive Images in Popular Culture Presentations
- Community Accountability and Community Awareness Campaigns
- Healthy Relationship Training/Mentoring Programs
- Domestic Violence Resources Need to be More Accessible

Contrasting View

- Mixed Domestic Violence Groups/Contrasting View

Include more Positive Images in Popular Culture Presentations

The SOS focus group participants were very critical of some of the ways in which black men and women are represented in some rap and Hip-Hop cultural products (e.g., lyrics, videos, films) and the manner in which some of the art forms artists represent themselves as men and women. Consistent with their criticism, some of the participants expressed the view that rap and hip-hop entertainers and the companies that produce and disseminate their products must include more positive lyrics, videos, and messages in their work. For example:

JR: *I feel more positive from all of our social channels, whether it be radio, print, TV, you know. Seeing more positivity, more black families together.*

Ant: *I feel like us, as black people need to monitor and change our music and what we're listening to and what we're watching and what our kids are watching.*

The discussion of community accountability also included references to black men needing to be proactive in intervening in abusive relationships that occur among members of one's family and friendship networks:

Soul: *I believe that in order for us to make a significant change in our community, we have to become... healing ambassadors. Love ambassadors. And being an ambassador. Being the right that you want to see.*

Zay: *Like I would speak with one of my sisters when she would say something not so cool to her boyfriend or saying something about him. And I would step up and say, "You know that ain't cool. If he had said that to you, you would have felt a certain way.*

Soul: *I would say accountability. Like the brother Zay says how he stepped up and told his sister what she did was wrong. We had to have a person who is responsible to start checking our home boys. You know what I mean? Females got to start checking their home girls when they see they're doing something that they know ain't right. Regardless of what's going on or who's doing it. If it ain't right, you got to check it.*

In addition, focus group participants discussion of community accountability extended to a call for celebrities and influencers who are admired and respected in the African American community to be encouraged to participate in anti-domestic violence community awareness campaigns. This recommendation was based on the view that high-profile celebrities (e.g., black entertainers and athletes) can be and are influential across an expansive social terrain. And therefore, would be very impactful in promoting the anti-domestic violence message. For example:

Nemo: *I think more awareness. I don't think people really care, unless it really affects you directly, you know, and it's within your own household, you don't need to be thinking about it, you know. Until you see a woman on the news or something, that got murdered by her boyfriend or beat. More discussion like this. Having the discussion in our community.*

Ant: *We really need to get these leaders out here to talk to these black men. We need to get these women out here who are big, influential people, like Beyonce, who have that same platform that they're using to promote sex and all that, to promote positivity.*

Healthy Relationship Training and Mentoring Programs

Across all of the SOS focus groups the call for healthy relationship training and mentoring programs was recommended as a strategy to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic violence generated the lengthiest discussion. Among the various prevention recommendations offered by the focus group participants the call for healthy relationship training and mentoring programs was number one. The

men who participated in these focus groups were in complete agreement that men like them, that is, men who reside in Milwaukee zip codes experiencing the highest rates of gun violence and incarceration; and men who have not been generally exposed to healthy relationships in their familial and friendship networks, need assistance and support on how to successfully build and maintain strong relationships with their romantic partners. For example:

Ant: *Like we have a focus group on how to become women, how to become a wife, how to become a husband, how to become a man. That's what we need to do.*

Participants were very clear in expressing the view that the primary goal of healthy relationship training and mentoring should be to change men's attitudes and willingness to resort to violence as the primary means of resolving relationship conflict with their romantic partners:

ThoBack: *So like a lot of awareness groups, just helping brothers who understand that acts of violence towards women can be controlled, like they said, through communication which gives respect and we have a understanding to agree to disagree but don't put your hands on her, okay?*

Furthermore, in discussing what needs to be done to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic violence in the communities in which they reside, the focus group participants continuously referred to the type of content that should be included in efforts to assist both men and women develop the skills

required to engage in healthy relationship behavior. One content area that they repeatedly referred to, not only with regard to facilitating healthy relationships, but also in their references to sources of relationship conflict, was the lack of self-knowledge and the need for self-knowledge. More specifically, what they were referring to here was the view that many African American men and women lack adequate historical and cultural knowledge of themselves as member of the African American race, as well as knowledge of how to effectively enact the roles of man and woman. For example:

Mo: *Well, we first, we need knowledge. If you don't know your role, then how can you play a role?*

Other Participants: *Correct? Right.*

Mo: *How can people in the family don't know the role, they're just not going to play it.*

Facilitator: Would you elaborate on that point. If we don't have knowledge, where should we be getting the knowledge from?

Mo: *Well, I know that the Bible or Christianity is a big institution. Now, I'm not a Christian myself, but I'm saying, I know it's a big institution in the community. Well, if you read the Bible in there, it tells you how you should treat your wife and you know certain roles are defined in there...And so, the roles in the household have to be defined. You can look into nature and see that everything is created in pairs, right? And those pairs function differently. Now, I'm not saying that a woman has a lesser role, or a man has more of a role. The role is equal. If they play both of their roles,*

right, you will have harmony and you will have peace in the household. But it's not until you order that household that you can have peace in the household. And the only way that we can get rid of all of the tension and all of the fighting, and all of the fussing is to add order into the household. That means that our people need to be taught.

According to the focus group participants, healthy relationship training and mentoring must also include content that enhances a man's ability to communicate effectively with his wife or girlfriend. Furthermore, communication was perceived by these men as an important feature of healthy and stable relationships. For example:

Jay: *Communication is one of the main things that I believe two people should have, man and woman, have in their relationship. First, they have to be able to communicate. And what I mean by being able to communicate; hearing what the other one is saying. And not just hearing but understanding what the other one is saying. Also, you have to be willing to change the way that you have been doing things and try something else sometimes. Because sometimes the way you've been doing things may not work. So, you would have to bend a little bit, especially when you're in a relationship. I'm saying, like myself, I'm in a relationship, I'm married. So I know I have to bend a little bit because I'm married, this is my wife, and I want to keep her happy, so I bends. Men do that.*

The SOS focus group participants also discussed the intersection of community awareness and healthy relationship training. That is, they expressed the view that healthy relationship training and mentoring should be a feature of a broader commitment to community accountability, community unity, and the implementation of an entrenched anti-domestic violence community awareness campaign. For example:

Remi: *I believe a re-education is what it will take. I say re-education because, I mean, our people are educated but with the wrong material. If we start to teach more emotional intelligence, more of relation relationship roles. If we start to teach self-value... As a black community, if we come together as a collective, we will be way more prosperous than if we are a separated community.*

DV Resources Need to Be More Accessible

Most medium and large cities in the United States have a domestic violence service delivery network that provides prevention and intervention services to victims of domestic violence, as well as batterers (Pence & McMahon, 1997). Yet, it was the view of the SOS focus group participants that for members of the African American community, these services are unknown, and therefore, not immediately accessible. In addition, the focus group participants suggested that not only are domestic violence services hard to access but so to our social services that exist to address a broader range of social challenges.

Remi: *There are a lot of resources to prevent these issues. The problem with these resources and organizations is that it is not obvious how to actually access these resources. These resources need to be more accessible. The knowledge needs to be more accessible to our people. We need a bigger presence of conscious people. I mean, it's a lot of conscious minds in Milwaukee, but not all of them are bold enough. Our people need to be bolder with their knowledge. We've got to each one, teach one.*

Mixed Domestic Violence Prevention Groups/A Contrasting Finding

A few of the participants suggested that one of the things that would improve communication and relations between African American men and women and to thereby reduce the occurrence of domestic violence is by providing more forums in which men and women could share their experiences and views on relationship challenges and differences in the perspectives of men and women as it relates to relationship issues. For the purposes of this report this thematic finding is recorded as a contrasting thematic finding because it is not consistent with the general emphasis of most of what the participants recommended with respect to preventing domestic violence in the African American community. However, it is important to note that none of the participants voiced any opposition to the suggestion of having mixed groups of men and women to address relationship challenges in the community. Listed below are some examples of support for mixed groups to address relationship conflict and domestic violence:

Nemo: *Or more discussions like this, having the conversation in our community, women sitting down, like this, same type of group, this focus group. It could be women on the other side. And like I think that's tied to what Zay is saying. It's like having the women...to start to understand the plight of the man. You know what I mean?*

Jay: *I believe instead of just having men having a group by themselves, and women having a group by themselves, bring them up together. Bring them both together, is what I am saying? And then you listen to the different opinions as to what's being said and what has been said and what is being done. I'm saying then that way I figure you could come up with better plans on how to navigate through all that trauma.*

The thematic findings reported immediately above suggest that black men who reside in inner-city communities possess unique insights to the various factors that contribute to relationship conflict and intimate partner violence occurring among African Americans, particularly those who reside in urban neighborhoods.

SOS Focus Groups Participants Views on Community Violence: Violence among Black Men

In an effort to address the violence challenge in Milwaukee, the SOS project not only sought to uncover the views of inner-city black men regarding how they perceive the sources of relationship conflict and factors leading to violence against women residing in inner-city neighborhoods, but also to uncover how these men perceive the major sources of conflict that occur between black men that lead to violent confrontations. Thus, the SOS focus group interview schedule also included a question designed to uncover how black men familiar with inner city neighborhood culture and social dynamics in Milwaukee perceive how black men involved in violent confrontations with other men justify resorting to violence as a means of resolving disputes.

The term community violence is generally used to refer to patterns of interpersonal violence which largely involve individuals who are not related by bonds of blood or intimacy ([Community Violence Prevention | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC](#)). An important distinction between community violence and domestic violence is the variation in victim offender relationship patterns. While domestic violence tends to involve victims and offenders who are connected by romantic relationships, the participants in acts of community violence tend to involve participants who are unrelated. However, it is

not uncommon for individuals involved in incidents of community violence to be acquainted with one another, as well as being strangers (Thompson & Tapp, 2022).

SOS Focus Groups Participants Views on the Sources of Conflict Leading to Violence Between Black Men

Acts of interpersonal violence do not generally occur spontaneously. Rather they occur within a particular social and situational context in which individuals engage in a sequence of interactions that culminate in a violent confrontation (Luckenbill, 1977; Oliver, 1998; Johnson & Wright, 2006). Furthermore, research examining the situational dynamics of violent confrontations, as well as research seeking to uncover how violent participants attribute meaning to and describe the sequence of events culminating in violent confrontations, has consistently reported that violent confrontations, particularly those occurring among men are generally precipitated by an act that at least one of the violent participants defined as a social rule violation (Luckenbill, 1977; Oliver, 1988; Johnson & Wright, 2006). Consistent with what is generally known about violent confrontations among black males residing in inner-city neighborhoods, the SOS focus group interview schedule included a question that sought to

uncover how the focus group participants defined and described the circumstances that are likely to lead men residing in their community to commit acts of violence against other men. In response to this question, the following thematic findings were reported:

- Disrespect
- Gang Rivalries and Drug Trafficking Disputes
- Economic Jealousy
- Romantic Competition
- Lack of Positive Role Models in the Family and Community

Contrasting Thematic Findings

- Outside Forces Promote Violence in the Black Community/Contrasting View
- Alcohol Consumption and Intoxication /Contrasting View

Disrespect

Many of the major studies of the lifestyle in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods (Anderson, 1999) and violence among black men (Oliver, 1998; Jacobs & Wright, 2006; Wilkinson, 2003), have found and reported that a major factor contributing to interpersonal conflicts leading to violent confrontations among black men is the perception that an antagonist has directed some type of disrespectful act toward them or their family or friends. The SOS focus group respondents limited their discussion of

disrespect to a description and criticism of the manner in which many young males speak to one another, using words that many older street-oriented men characterize as being disrespectful. What they suggested is that the younger generation of street-oriented black males have a cultural style that creates a social atmosphere that contributes to a heightened arousal for aggression among black males:

Soul: *I see a lot of like in this, like in the generation under me. I am in my '40s, I see a lot of these young cats. And some in the '30s, they went from bitch being a word of disrespect to bitch being a word of endearment. Like, bitch what is going on to each other. Like this is how they greet each other...So, it's like it changed in the way that we respect each other to some of the things that we used to when we were growing up that used to be terms of disrespect.*

Gang Rivalries and Drug Trafficking Disputes

A major source of violent crime offending and victimization among African American males, particularly those between the ages of 15 and 40, who reside in disadvantaged inner-city neighborhoods is related to their involvement in street gangs and/or involvement in illegal drug trafficking or drug use (Taylor, 2007; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Taylor, 1990; Klein, 1995; Taylor, 1990). Consistent with this finding in crime research, a similar finding was uncovered in the SOS focus group discussions:

Sinclair: *Gang involvement. Well, when you have different street cultures, different symbols, different colors, different values, and different things like that, that identifies you with a*

particular identity. Then that comes also with a thinking and the behavior, as well as a concept of protecting your neighborhood or whatever your clique is.

In addition, the focus group participants described how black men become involved in disputes related to gang rivalries or claiming an area for drug trafficking leads to conflict:

Remi: *From different neighborhood, different territory. Yeah. I mean, you're not from over here, you know what I mean? You don't, got no dealings with us. I mean, even when I was growing up. I mean, Milwaukee was sectioned off like you said by gangs... I mean everybody claimed hoods.*

The SOS focus group generally agreed that Milwaukee's proximity to Chicago has contributed to the proliferation of street gangs and gang-related violence in Milwaukee and thereby has increased gang rivalries and territorial disputes:

Remi: *I would like to say that I believe Chicago has a huge influence on Milwaukee when it comes to violence in general. Milwaukee, Chicago, and Detroit have always been in competition. I mean, you hear people bragging about the different murder rates. Do you know what I mean? The crime rate, the arrest rate, and all kinds of stuff, it's a competition. But also, the reason I say that is because almost every gang that originated in Chicago came to Milwaukee. I mean, they came to Milwaukee and to Medina, you know, because it always started off in Chicago. And then somebody ventured up here and created another set in Milwaukee.*

Participants also referred to the tendency for disputes to occur among drug users and drug dealers in areas where illegal drugs are sold and/or consumed:

Mike: *Drugs are always on the block... A tremendous amount of conflict among us involves drugs. You have too many people on the same block selling products.*

JR: *So outside of my house is like a well-known pick-up spot. People come to buy drugs all the time. So, there's conflicts there about who is on the spot or if they, you know, if the people aren't acting right generally just people around each other create conflict outside of my house all the damn time.*

Only one participant out of the 21 explicitly identified alcohol as a factor contributing to conflict among black men:

JR: *I would like to clarify. When I say drugs, I'm including alcohol to because there's a lot that, you know, people start off the night and they will get tipsy and by the time they get drunk and then you start to add in other things. But alcohol is definitely a contributor to some arguments and fights and bad situations.*

Economic Jealousy

Envy of the material possessions of other men and their access to resources to facilitate valued manhood displays have been reported in prior studies of violence among black men as a factor contributing to conflict between black men (Oliver, 1998). Several focus group participants listed and discussed how jealousy in the form of a man being envious of what another male possesses in the way of money, highly valued material goods (e.g., expensive designer clothing, high priced athletic sneakers, automobiles, etc.,) and/or intimate involvement with highly desired and sought after females has the potential to contribute to conflict among black men residing in inner-city neighborhoods:

Nemo: *Jealousy. It's related to what Zay is saying about just not loving yourself, not being secure in who you are. And so, I see a lot of brothers always thinking, we really think he's whatever when really that should be not even on your radar. You should not be so concerned with his life. Why are you looking at this other brother because he drives a better car or you know, dress better or got a finer woman, you know. I see so much jealousy among brothers and I don't see that in the white community.*

Facilitator: *What do you think that is?*

Nemo: *It goes back to slavery or something. It's like we hate each other, we just hate each other. Kiss the white man's ass. Would you talk to them with that type of disrespect? But then we look at each other and treat each other like absolute shit unless we know you... I think jealousy is the root*

of it. It's like status is so important to us in our community. Whose got the better car? Whose got the better house? Who lives in the better neighborhood? Who dress better? And it's like that's the thing that we measure each other by.

ThoBack: I think a lot of comes from one word, and that is competition... *We're so busy being envious of each other*

Romantic Competition

Competition for sexual access to females or a particular female has a long history of being identified as a source of conflict between males (Daly & Wilson, 1992). While the SOS focus group participants did not spend a great deal of time discussing romantic competition and violent confrontations between black men, they did identify it as a source of conflict that has the potential to lead to violent confrontations:

ThowBack: Competition for women. I know he got her, but I want her. We are going to have some drama about this. You did all this to do nothing with her.

JR: *I guess that would be the girls.*

Lack of Positive Role Models

Throughout the focus group discussions, the SOS participants, whether discussing their views on intimate partner violence or on acts of violence occurring between black males mentioned how the lack

of positive role models is a major cause of problematic behavior in disadvantaged inner-city neighborhoods. This point of view transcended a focus on the immediate circumstances and interpersonal conflict focus of the general responses of the participants to the question but goes to a larger issue of causation. That is, emphasis on how not being exposed to positive role models provides a pathway to engaging in problematic behavior, including violent offending:

Phynox: *Pretty much just the way people are being brought up today...No parents in the household, no guidance amongst or examples in the community or, you know, proper guidance. That's what is missing.*

Sources of Conflict among Black Men? Contrasting Views

While the primary focus of the question was to explore with the focus group participants what they regarded as the types of interpersonal conflicts that precipitate violent confrontations among black males, some of the respondents' offered views on the general causes of conflict and violence among black males that were in contrast to the emphasis of their collective responses, including: alcohol intoxication and outside forces promoting violence in the black community.

Alcohol Intoxication

Alcohol and drug consumption often exist in the foreground of acts of violence, particularly acts of violence involving males who spend an inordinate amount of time in streetcorner settings (Wilkinson, 2003). It is important to note that even though alcohol intoxication is recorded here as a contrasting thematic finding, that most violent confrontations occurring among black males tend to occur in streetcorner settings (e.g., public streets where people congregate, bars, outside convenient stores, empty lots, drug houses, etc.) where alcohol and drugs are routinely consumed (Oliver, 1998; Jacobs & Wright, 2006). As such, it is reasonable that a focus group participant familiar with black male street culture would suggest that alcohol or drug consumption contributes to violent confrontations among black men:

JR: *The only thing that I would clarify a little bit more is that's when I say drugs, I'm including alcohol to... Because, there's a lot that people start off the night and they will get tipsy and by the time they get drunk and then you start to add in other things. But alcohol is definitely a contributor to some arguments and fights and bad situations.*

Facilitator: *I interviewed some men a while ago who were involved in fights that happened in bars. And some of them admitted that they were drinking, but they felt that the drinking was not the key factor for them to engage in violence, but their perception of a rule violation. In other words, for the most part, they felt that whatever substance they were using wasn't the deciding*

factor. The deciding factor for them was he disrespected me or he disrespected somebody in my family, or he threatened me or something of that nature. What's your response to that?

JR: *I see it a little differently. I was a bartender for 15 years. And it's hard for my customers to tell when they go from completely sober to buzz. And once you cross over it, you don't necessarily feel drunk... And yes, there may have been a disrespectful remark or comment made, but generally speaking, you wouldn't have been in that position to go that direction without those drinks.*

Outside Forces Promote Violence in the Black Community

A noteworthy contrasting view offered by one of the focus group participants was that organizations outside the black community promote social conditions that increase the likelihood of violence among African Americans. In addition, it was the view of this participant, that the proliferation of drugs and guns in disadvantaged black communities reflected the efforts of those who did not wish to see black people progress and thrive:

Mo: *Also, we're being manipulated from outside in America and we're being given guns and we're being given drugs and that's why. So, here in America we have people from the outside controlling the ghetto from remote control.*

Belief that Others are Carrying Weapons

In her study of gun-related violence among inner city youth and young adults Wilkinson (2003) found that many of her respondents indicated that they carried guns as a result of concerns about their personal safety in anticipation of situations in which their lives might be threatened. In response to the question “why do so many young men in your community carry so weapons,” the SOS focus group participants offered nuanced responses that included a generalized belief that other males in the community were carrying weapons. In addition, some participants suggested that the belief that other males were carrying weapons was reinforced by tough guy manhood personas displayed in gangsta rap lyrics and videos. For example:

JR: *I think like believing somebody else has a gun and you know, it's almost like how come you don't have one and it might not be said like that. But there's a certain like expectations. Expectations of how you're supposed to be. You know...there's a lot that we get from media, but also there's a lot like, like Phynox said, there's also a lot that we're seeing on TV, you know, And I think that's a big reason why there's a lot of guns being carried around.*

Phynox: *That's again, promotion of, you know, that type of lifestyle being that hip hop is supposed to be a culture. That's how you say I won't say better lifestyle... It seems like it has added to some of the culture, you know, the wrong side of Hip Hop.*

Facilitator: Can I ask you to elaborate on that? Are you saying that over the years that some forms of hip-hop encourage individuals to present themselves as men in a tough manner that includes the possession of weapons and a projected willingness to use weapons? And if you're not saying that what are you saying?

Phynox: *Well, let me correct that. Not necessarily Hip-Hop itself, but maybe a genre that you know came about, which would be probably Gangsta music or thug music.*

ThoBack: *A lot of these brothers are carrying weapons because they can't take no for an answer. And they're insecure with themselves. They don't trust their ability to be able to talk to another man.*

In describing a young man, he was mentoring, Soul stated that the young man, similar to other young males he was familiar with, appeared to be carrying a weapon as a fashion statement and to symbolically express his commitment to a toughness or manhood orientation:

Soul: *I noticed he had the gun on because he got to. He got to have his Jordans on. He got to have the gun. It's more of a wardrobe, as flash. And like how we used to wear necklaces, guns became a part of our wardrobe and to let you know I got one.*

Belief that Others will Use Weapons to Resolve Disputes

Focus group participants also expressed the view that one of the main reasons why so many black men carry weapons in the inner-city is that the neighborhoods in which they reside are perceived as dangerous and that an important social reality of the social world in which they reside is that it is common for individuals to rely on guns to resolve disputes:

Unidentified Participant: *When you are out and about, you don't know what might happen.*

Nemo: *Fear. That's why people get guns. That's why anybody gets a gun. I was in a situation where I'm a convicted felon and I was thinking about getting a gun. I think brothers carry guns because of where they live. You don't see brothers out in Wauwatosa carrying guns. There are brothers that live out there. You don't see brothers in other communities walking around with guns because it is not violent all the time. In our community there are shootings all the time. You just turn on the news... It's like that plays on a person's mind.*

Soul: *I see so many cats and I say, "Why you got a gun?" And they say, 'I got stay ready because I don't want nobody to try me'. And... a lot of people that have guns, be the cats that you will feel that they'd be telling you they got to stay ready, are the ones who are looking for the drama.*

Social Media Influences on Black Male Violence

Over the course of the past fifteen years social media platforms have evolved into a major site facilitating sociability and social interaction throughout our society. Moreover, virtual online spaces have become a routine feature of daily life for the general public, as well as street-oriented males (Laugher & Densely, 2017, Prooz, Decker, & Moule, 2015). Consistent with this evolving social reality, the SOS focus group interview schedule included a question that sought to uncover participants' views on what role, if any, do social media postings and use of social media play in conflict and violence among men residing in inner-city communities. As a result of this inquiry, the following thematic findings were found:

- Context for Engaging in Symbolic and Overt Threats and Assertiveness
- Assessment of Opponent's Harm Capability
- Virtual Third-Party Instigation of Conflict
Increases Number of People Aware of the Conflict/This has both reputational and 3rd party instigation implications.
- Promotion of Negative Influences in Rap and Hip Hop Culture

Context for Engaging in Symbolic and Overt Threats and Assertiveness

In recent years, a number of researchers have begun to examine the role that online virtual spaces play in facilitating interpersonal conflict and violence among males involved with street gangs and/or participants in urban streetcorner society (Laugher & Densley, 2017; Prooz, Decker, & Moule, 2015). For example, Laugher and Densley (2017) found that online virtual spaces function in a manner similar to actual street-corner settings with regard to providing gang members with a setting and an opportunity to insult, disrespect, and threaten to harm those with whom they have a conflict. In a similar fashion, the SOS focus group participants discussed the role of social media postings in facilitating interpersonal conflict that has the potential to escalate into violent confrontations. One of the observations that they noted was that online virtual spaces provide an opportunity to engage in anonymous aggressiveness and symbolic, as well as overt threats. For example:

***JR:** There's a certain bit of anonymity when you're behind a TV screen or when you're behind a computer screen and you have a keyboard in front of you. You know what Mike Tyson says, 'Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.' And you know, you have these big plans on the computer screen. And when you're stepping outside and, you know, you've never been into a fight. And you know, there might be a little bit of that person in your head telling you, "Oh, I don't know, you bring, you know, that helps with the whole pushing towards violence." I think social media plays a big part. Everybody's not in everybody's face anymore.*

Zay: *A lot of people get really extremely tough on social media, but they wouldn't be as aggressive in person... Straight gangster on keyboard. That's what I call social media gangsters. A lot of people are really tough on their social media pages.*

Facilitator: How does being bold and bad on social media at the keyboard actually lead up to actual violent confrontations in the streets?

Zay: *If I see you in a person I want to know, do you really have the same image? Do you really feel that way? I want to see how you're really going to do everything you said on that keyboard. You're going to do in person what you said on that keyboard.*

SOS participants also expressed the view that social media has the capacity to exacerbate the escalation of interpersonal conflicts that occur among inner-city black males given the larger audience of third parties who become aware of a dispute, which has reputational implications for the various considerations related to dispute resolution:

Ant: *It's making everybody have to act when on social media. Like for instance, if something happened between me and Bro, you know, something just happened between me and Remi. If it happened between me and him on the street, nine times out of ten we can resolve it. But once social media get ahold of it and everybody else gets a hold of it that makes that situation way bigger than what it got be. Now you can't even have that conversation because*

now the main focus is I can't be no chump because I can't look like this because I'm having a conversation with my opposition. No, I got to stand up to my opposition...The audience makes the conflict.

A major difference that participants identified between interpersonal conflicts and violent confrontations that originate in virtual spaces compared to those that originate in streetcorner settings is that unlike streetcorner originating conflicts that tend to include extended verbal threats in face-to-face encounters leading up to violent confrontation (Oliver, 1998; Wilkinson & Fagan, 1996), conflicts that unfold in virtual spaces, when the combatants interact in person, disrespectful and threatening verbalizations between the antagonists are significantly limited. For example:

ThoBack: *Because now you are on an escalator. You already put your bid in. So, when I see you, it's on. Ain't that what you said on social media because you know what you said and I know what you said. So, when I see you out on the street, you thought I was not going to catch you we dance that dance. That's what's going to happen, that's why the violence is going on, and that's why it's a buildup.*

Assessment of Opponent's Harm Capability

In prior research examining the interpersonal and situational dynamics of violent confrontations between black males, it was reported that it is common for violent confrontations involving black men to

begin in public or semi-public social settings where other individuals are present to witness the escalation of conflict (Oliver, 1998; Jacobs & Wright, 2006; Wilkinson & Fagan, 1996). Furthermore, it has been found that during the argumentative interaction between antagonists, it is not uncommon for the individuals involved in the dispute to assess the situation to determine their likelihood of success if the conflict escalates to violence (Oliver, 1998; Jacobs & Wright, 2006). One of the considerations that is often contemplated by individuals involved in streetcorner disputes is whether or not their antagonist has family or friends immediately present who might insert themselves into the encounter if the verbal conflict were to escalate to physical violence (Oliver, 1998). According to the SOS focus group participants, when disputes originate or evolve in virtual space, individuals who are involved in the dispute are likely to review their antagonist's social media pages to learn about them and their background, as well as review the social media pages of their antagonist's family members and friends to determine what type of harm their antagonist might present and the nature of support their antagonist might have access to if the dispute escalates into a full blown violent confrontation. For example:

Mo: *You're looking at who my friends are. I'm looking at who your friends are. I'm looking at what kind of things you're displaying that might be a danger to me. We may not even be tooled up something I've done to you, but because we weren't in the same circle or something or I just I ended up doing something to somebody that you know, now we are into it because you see me post something about it, you know, now I'm talking about smoking you.???*

Moe went on to elaborate on how symbolic and overt threats online can serve to escalate disputes between individuals:

Moe: *I was going to say social media plays a huge role in not just the actual act of violence but how far it goes because we may be into it on something petty that the brother said. And it could just be petty as you know, we have a few words about it and that's that. Or we may be talking about fighting and now I see what went on your page and see you posting pictures of guns and all this other stuff. And now I have got to get right with you. I'm I want to have one up. So now I'm bringing guns to the table. You know what I mean now, where it went from something that could have been a backyard brawl.*

Virtual Third-Party Instigation

Studies of violence have consistently reported that third parties are generally present in violent confrontations that occur in street corner settings. It has been further observed that third parties may contribute to the situational dynamics and unfolding of violent encounters as neutral by-standers, mediators, or instigators (Oliver, 1998; Jacobs & Wright, 2006). Furthermore, in recent years violence researchers have become interested in discovering how virtual platforms and spaces are used to facilitate interpersonal conflict and violent confrontations and what contribution, if any, do third parties play (Laugher & Densely, 2017; Prooz, Decker, & Moule, 2015). For example, it has been reported that gang members routinely use virtual platforms to threaten rival gangs and to proclaim their commitment to

manhood orientations that include resorting to violent means to resolve disputes (Laugher, & Densely, 2017). In an effort to address this gap in the literature the SOS focus group participants were asked to discuss their perception and understanding of some of the ways in which social media postings invoke third party contributions to interpersonal conflict and violence among men residing in inner-city Milwaukee. For example:

Jay: *It might have even more consequences than just a conflict that occurred right out on this corner out here because the conflict on social media is being broadcast to a whole lot more people. So now you know that's a little bit different with social media.*

Jay also noted that when interpersonal conflict is broadcast on social media to a large virtual audience it becomes more difficult for the combatants to de-escalate the conflict:

Jay: *Now it's being blown up and now you're going to have to go back at it again because he'd been disrespectful.*

In addition, the SOS focus group participants believed that when conflicts between individuals are disseminated on social media it dramatically increases the number of individuals who may seek to instigate the conflict and encourage the antagonists to resolve the matter by resorting to violence:

ThoBack: *You might have more people, you have 100 to 200 contributes on your comments and everybody's egging everybody on that's builds it back up... Now I got to respond because I don't want to be seen as a punk.*

The focus group participants also expressed the view that social media and virtual spaces provide a location for third parties to engage in anonymous instigation of conflict. For example:

Facilitator: *Do you think third parties play a role in conflicts that occur in virtual space? That is, people who are not necessarily directly involved, but they participate in instigating the conflict.*

JR: *I agree. There's instigators and pot stirrers in the virtual space because there's a certain anonymity. There's, you know, you have a certain hiding in the bushes...where you can just kind of shake the hornet's nest and then walk off. This just leads to craziness in the streets.*

Sinclair: *There's a trend going on where you have online beef. And these are the things where the audience wants to hear. So, they've got expressions like, oh, they clapped back, right. So now they say things that encourage and promote violence, even online. And sometimes things get out of hand... because say you have two rappers, for example. Although competition is part of marketing and record sales, sometimes they can go to a street level. So, you say something personal, he gets upset. He says something, next thing you know when I see you come to my city, I'm killing you. And some people have killed a person, another rapper, and that wasn't a real beef.*

Promotion of Negative Influences in Rap and Hip Hop

The SOS focus group participants expressed the view that social media has an influence on violence among black males in several ways. For example, social media provides a platform for the dissemination of rap songs, rap lyrics, and problematic representations of manhood that encourage toughness, carrying weapons, and using weapons to resolve disputes. It was the view of some participants that gangsta rap has had a lingering effect across generations, in which certain types of young men become attracted to the masculine imagery and the gangsta and thug way of doing manhood that is represented and glorified in the art form as a desirable way of living and being:

Facilitator: *Why do so many young men in your community carry firearms?*

Phynox: *Promotion of that type of lifestyle being that Hip Hop is supposed to be a culture. That's how you say I won't say better lifestyle understanding to a lifestyle it seems like it has added to some of the culture, but the wrong side of Hip Hop.*

Facilitator: Can I ask you to elaborate on that? Are saying that over the years that some forms of Hip Hop encourage individuals to present themselves as men in a tough manner that includes the possession of weapons and the potential use of weapons. And if you're not saying that what are you saying?

Phynox: *Well, let me correct that. Not necessarily Hip Hop itself, but maybe a genre that you know came about, which would probably be Gangsta music or thug music. That's the side that has promoted street life to be what it is now. So, you have rap artists saying, 'I carry.' 'I do this, I do that.' These are the images that are placed in front of our youth but shouldn't be.*

JR: *Expectations of how you're supposed to be. There's a lot that we get from media, but also there's a lot like, like Phynox said, there's also a lot that we're seeing on TV, you know, And I think that's a big reason why there's a lot of guns being carried.*

Justifying Violence Against Other Men

An evolving body of urban ethnographic and qualitative research on violence has sought to examine how black men residing in disadvantaged inner-city neighborhoods justify resorting to violence as a means of resolving disputes with other men (Oliver, 1998; Anderson, 1999; Taylor, 2007; Wilkinson, 2003; Jacobs & Wright, 2006). In an effort to advance what is known about how black men justify engaging in acts of violence against other black men, the SOS focus group interview schedule posed the question,

“How do men in your community justify committing acts of violence against other men?” In response to this question, the following thematic findings were found:

- Disrespect and Avoiding Reputational Damage
- Self-Defense
- Lack of Trust in Law Enforcement and Violent Self-Help
- Normalized Expectation of Violence as a Means of Settling Disputes
- Preserving Personal Autonomy

Disrespect/Avoiding Reputational Damage

Most studies that examine how inner-city black men justify resorting to acts of violence against other men have reported that perceptions that an antagonist has engaged in some type of disrespectful act provides justification to resort to violence (Anderson, 1999; Jacobs & Wright, 2006; Oliver, 1998; Wilkinson, 2003). Furthermore, this research indicates that violence is justified as a means of mitigating reputational damage that is anticipated if a violent response is not directed at the rule violator (Anderson, 1999; Jacobs & Wright, 2006; Oliver, 1998). Consistent with prior research examining how black men justify committing acts of violence against men, the focus group participants also referred to how disrespect justifies resorting to violence:

JR: *Respect. Making sure somebody else respects them. There are some people that place a high value on that. You know, 'you're not going to disrespect me. I'm not going to be disrespected.'. lot of people who have died for that.*

Facilitator: *Why is disrespect something that justifies violence?*

JR: *If it's done in front of people that you respect. There could be a feeling of you losing social standing within that group. You know, a certain amount of hazing would probably happen because you didn't protect your name or whatever you're protecting.*

The identification and characterization of black males' justifications for resorting to violence were also framed as resorting to violence as a way of responding to being a victim of a recognized community rule violation:

Unidentified Participant: *They going to play the victim role. And, if I'm a victim, I'm justified engaging in violence to pay them back for victimizing me.*

Self-Defense

A common finding in studies that ask respondents to justify why they resorted to violence in a particular situation is the claim of self-defense (Oliver, 1998; Jacobs & Wright, 2006, Wilkinson, 2003). It is important to note that violence as self-defense may be resorted to in situations involving aggressive verbal threats, threatening physical gestures and actual acts of violence. For example, in the domestic violence

section of this report, some SOS focus group participants described scenarios in which men would justify resorting to violence against female romantic partners who had engaged in what they perceived as threatening physical gestures and body movements that fall short of actual violent action. When asked to explain how men who reside in the inner-city neighborhoods in Milwaukee justify resorting to violence against other men to resolve disputes, the SOS included self-defense as one of the justifications that they discussed. For example:

Phynox: *Well, I think first and foremost would be protection of yourself. Self-defense, you know, someone not knowing the end results. You're dealing with a situation that's unexpected for one, no one wants to. I wouldn't think no one. But then again, there are people that want to go around bullying, people just want to fight...*

Jay: *Men resort to violence. One, trying to walk away from you. You are pulling on me. I'm telling you to leave me alone. Just go on about your business. Leave me alone. The thing I know you to bust me in the head. You provoked me and then I turned around and hit you. There it is that's all it takes. You block me again. It is provoked.*

Lack of Trust in Law Enforcement and Violent Self-Help

Historically, public opinion research, dating back to the 1960's has consistently reported that blacks are less likely than whites to report that they have confidence in law enforcement. For example, in

a 2014 Gallup public opinion survey that posed the question, “Do you have confidence in the police,” blacks were two times more likely (25%) to report having very little or no confidence in the police, compared to 12% of white respondents (Newport, 2014). Furthermore, in a 2019 Gallup survey that asked, “Are blacks in your community treated less fairly than whites in dealings with the police, 77% of blacks in Gallup said that blacks are treated less fairly than whites by police, whereas 45% of whites said blacks are treated less fairly than whites by police. This amounts to a 32% difference in how blacks and whites view treatment of blacks by the police (Jones, 2019). Additionally, in a study of the accounts of a sample of black men involved in violent confrontations in inner-city St. Louis, Jacobs and Wright (2006) found that some of their respondents reported that they were motivated to resolve disputes with an antagonist on their own and without law enforcement assistance because they, friends, or family members had had experiences reporting victimizations to the police and the police response was inadequate. In response to the question, “How do men in your community justify committing acts of violence against other men,” several of the SOS participants referred to how dislike and lack of trust in law enforcement leads some black men to seek justice for violations against themselves or family or friends on their own. That is, to use violence as a form of self-help in response to rule violations or criminal acts perpetrated against them or their family or friends. For example:

Mo: *I want justice, but I cannot call the police, okay? Because we don't have a relationship with the police. And the police don't help this community. So, what am I going to do? I got to get that*

justice, okay? And so, because of that I'm going to retaliate back. You get what I'm saying? So, it's not until we get justice [from society] that we're going to stop the violence in our community.

Normalized Expectation of Violence as a Means of Settling Disputes

For residents of disadvantaged inner-city neighborhoods, hearing about, witnessing, or experiencing violence is a routine feature of everyday life (Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2010; Taylor, 2007; Wilson, 1996). As such, an important aspect of the black boy passage from childhood, teenage, and into adulthood, involves learning how to interpret and manage problematic encounters that are likely to lead to violent confrontations (Anderson, 1999; Wilkinson, 2003; Wilson, 1996). Consistent with prior research that describes the omni-present potential and concern for violent victimization among black males who reside in inner city neighborhoods, the SOS focus group participants made reference to the expectation of violence as a reason that black males rely on to justify resorting to violence. For example:

Sinclair: *I think that part of the justification is that we have normalized what we see in the streets. And it has become so normal to us that we have no feeling towards what we see. It has become a natural thing that happens where we are desensitized towards what we see happening on Fox 6 News every night. It's a part of our subculture... Anytime you get a person to walk up to somebody and shoot them in the head and then go to a party and drink and have fun, he has no feeling. He has nothing, no spiritual nature in him enough to even feel a moral competence. So that has become normalized in the black ghettos, in the black community.*

Violence has become so common in disadvantaged black neighborhoods that at least one of the focus group participants described involvement in violent incidents as a rite of passage for young black males that is reinforced by social accolades and deference:

Nemo: *For some reason in our community, violence is like a rite of passage. When I went to prison, it's like I was a celebrity at 14 for killing somebody. You know what I mean? And that's sick if you think about it. But in our community, that's the location right there. I'm doing 20 years. My life is destroyed. I've taken somebody else's life, but I played into it, it was like damn. Okay, I ain't got to worry about no canteen. You come in the door and brothers, respect you just because I was on the news or something like that. Our rite of passage is violence, not something for justification. Yes, that's the justification. It's like we watch too much rocking coming up and all this crazy stuff, man, and we just think about hurting each other. It's like that's what makes us a man. If a man disrespecting us bust him or shoot that nigger, that makes you a man. If you don't do that, you're not a man. That's how we were raised? That's how I was raised on Fourth and North streets.*

In addressing the normalization of violence in inner-city Milwaukee, focus group participants supported the view that because there is so much violence in the neighborhoods in which they reside, that as a male it is very common to traverse through the community hyper-sensitive to the risks of becoming a

victim of violence. Thereby manifesting a state of mind and consciousness that that is aroused for aggressive self-defense.

Remi: *Well, self-preservation is the first law of nature, so oftentimes I mean in the streets, you often walk around with your head on a swivel, know. You're always under defense. I mean we feel we got our guard up. Most defense mechanisms are more aggressive than passive Most violence is defensive rather than offensive.*

Preserving Personal Autonomy

In a study of violent confrontations among black males frequenting bars and other streetcorner settings (e.g., streetcorners, empty lots, drug houses, and other social spaces where street-oriented black men congregate) Oliver (1998) found that one of the most significant factors contributing to interpersonal conflict and violence among these men were insults and other behaviors that they defined as a threat to a man's autonomy. That is, his capacity to conduct his life in a manner in which he was free from external interference. In a similar fashion, when asked to explain how black males justify resorting to violence, the SOS focus group participants discussed how actual or perceived threats to a man's autonomy would be viewed as an autonomy transgression that would justify a violent response in retaliation for this type of rule-violating behavior. For example:

Facilitator: What are men trying to achieve when they engage in violent acts against other men? What's the goal?

JR: *I kind of feel like power. You know, not wanting to lose it and also kind of piggy backing off of what you just said about other people feeling like they'll be unable to disrespect you if you're in a position of power, I feel like if you get disrespected and don't handle it, the people that are underneath you will look at you as weak. So you kind of have to exert your power and demand that respect.*

Phynox: *Personal control...We deal with people making other people subordinate to their idea...They want to be in charge. But they may not have the skills to be in charge. So, they utilize other people, so they can be in a position of power. You know, they can say hey, 'I am the man.'*

In contrast to preserving one's independence/autonomy as justification for resorting to violence against other men after being subject to a rule-violation, some SOS participants identified and discussed how men may resort to violence as a type of autonomy transgression against their antagonist as a way of imposing their will on another man and thereby intentionally violating the autonomy of their antagonist:

Unidentified Participant: *What motivates a lot of these men is they use it[violence] to dominate someone. They get a kick out of dominating and controlling people.*

JR: *We're fairly competitive. I feel like winning is kind of a driving factor. It might not have been as serious for one of the counterparts. But, once it gets to that point, now it's, like, 'I'm not going to lose. You're going to do or act or say or do what I want you do...'*

Black Men's Views on Community Violence Prevention

Given that the SOS focus group participants were recruited to participate in the focus groups as a result of their experiences as black men who had been raised in inner-city neighborhoods in Milwaukee and who possessed insider-specific experiences and understandings about the challenges of those who reside in the inner-city, the SOS focus group interview schedule included a question designed to explore what these men believed should be done to prevent and reduce the high rates of interpersonal violence among black males. The specific question was: "What should be done to prevent/ reduce violence committed by and against black men who reside in the inner city?" In response to this area of inquiry the following prevention and intervention strategies were proposed:

- Fatherhood Training to Combat Father Absence in the Community
- Expose At-Risk Boys and Men to Positive Role Models and Mentoring Programs

- Increase Access to Vocational Training and Employment Opportunities

Fatherhood Training to Combat Father Absence in the Community

According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2016) in 2014 African American children (66%) were 2 ½ times more likely than non-Hispanic white children (25%) to reside in households headed by single parents. What is significant and also has implications with regard to parenting is that 50% of African American children reside in single-mother households compared to 23% of all youth nationally and 18% of white children. Furthermore, among children living in single-parent households, those living with their fathers only were more likely to have a parent in the labor force than those living with their mothers only (86% vs. 74%). What is important about this is that father absence has been found to associated with racial disparities in teen pregnancy, growing up in poverty and juvenile and adult incarceration (Clayton, Mincy, & Blankenhorn, 2003). In discussing what needs to be done to prevent and reduce violence among black males there was a great deal of consensus among the SOS focus group participants that growing up without a father is a major factor leading black males towards “the streets” and involvement in problematic behaviors that increase the risk of violent crime victimization and offending. As such, many of the participants expressed the view that more needs to be done to assist men in becoming productive men, and particularly fathers. For example:

Sinclair: *I think what needs to be done is that fathers have to take on a responsibility to educate themselves on how to be proper fathers, and how to be proper men. And how to be*

proper examples. And then take that same knowledge and that culture and implement that in the home. And then teach your child how to implement that in society.

Facilitator: *So, what you suggest, rescue me if I'm wrong. You feel that one of the problems our boys and young men have is the absence of their fathers?*

Sinclair: *Yes. The absence of the father. Yes, 100%. I didn't have my father. I ended up having to do over 20 years in prison because I made bad decisions in my life. I got kicked out of all of all my schools. I was raised by a mother that was addicted to crack. I didn't have any proper examples or, you know, any of that. And if it wasn't for the men that I came across in the prison system, you know, men that belonged to Islam, I wouldn't be able to be in this direction that I am today.*

Some participants emphasized the importance of fathers or positive male mentors being active in the raising of young boys, particularly in helping them to process problematic messages and images conveyed in popular culture:

JR: *So, having the male involved in the child's life. I know that everybody's not going to get along with their significant other and be in a happy, healthy relationship, but nonetheless, boys having that relationship with that other male or father figure, definitely would help a lot.*

Facilitator: *Why would it help?*

JR: *It would help with understanding. Having another male or having a father figure in that young person's life. For instance, when you listen to rap music and there's stuff that's being said, being pumped into our ears at a young age and without a father figure or any sort of parental figure to explain that that's a song. That is a persona and that's not real life. You grow up hearing that, it becomes a mantra, and it becomes a part of your life, in my opinion. And so having a father figure or having a male in your life as you grow.*

Expose At-Risk Boys and Men to Positive Role Models

The SOS focus group participants agreed that boys and even some adult males in the community need to be exposed to well-functioning men who can help them navigate the passage from boyhood to manhood or the passage from problematic manhood to functional manhood in a manner in which when they become adult men that are legitimately self-sustaining and who contribute to the community in a positive way, rather than pose a threat to social order and harmony in the community. In addition, there was consensus among the focus group participants that there needs to be more opportunities for black men to come together to discuss their personal and social challenges and to share experiences of failure and success:

Soul: *We need to be more proactive in our community and being more in tune with the youth... Our community is our tribe. We need to take more personal responsibility and being proactive and help the kids. Ask them what can I do to help? What would you like me to do to help you be*

successful? What can I provide? We can do other things that could help out instead of feeling like we have got to put them in prison or feeling that we got to tell them what to do.

Zay: *We have to be talking. It's like we have to be taught. Stuff like what we're doing now. We are talking among men, we talk among each other and trying to promote self-love.*

Increase Access to Vocational Training and Employment Opportunities

Failure to successfully navigate the public educational system and the subsequent lack of marketable vocational skills function as a major pathway leading many black males who reside in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods to adopt problematic manhood roles and lifestyles associated with increased risk of engaging in violent offending and/or experiencing violent victimization (Anderson, 1999; Oliver, 2006; Wilson, 1996). Given their awareness of the social challenges confronting many black males, particularly those who reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods, the SOS focus group participants strongly suggested that efforts be undertaken to assist males at-risk for violent crime offending or victimization with gaining access to vocational training and employment opportunities:

ThoBack: *I think the main reason why this violence is going on, number one, is not creating enough jobs for young brothers to learn trades, to get off the street. So, they resort to violence and hustling on the street because they can't get a job.*

Discussion

The SOS focus groups were organized to supplement the SOS violence prevention awareness campaign and to enhance understanding of intimate partner violence and community violence in the African American community in Milwaukee by facilitating a discussion of these social challenges with black men familiar with Milwaukee's inner-city neighborhoods. As such, the SOS Focus Group Discussion Guide was divided into two sections. One section included questions pertaining to intimate partner violence and the second section was comprised of questions focusing on community violence. To facilitate a summary of selected major findings derived from analysis of the focus group discussions, the summary review of the findings that follows will be separated into a discussion of selected intimate partner violence thematic findings, followed by a review of key community violence thematic findings.

Domestic Violence

In the field of domestic violence research there are very few studies that have been designed to uncover black men's views on intimate partner violence generally and even fewer studies that examine the perspectives of black men who have battered their wives or girlfriends. What is known about how race influences and/or mediates battering perpetrated by black men is largely derived from the experiences of domestic violence service providers who provide court ordered batterer intervention services to batterers (Gondolf, 1997; Gondolf & Williams, 2001; Williams, 1989, 1999) and the theoretical and

conceptual work describing causal factors, including structural, social, and cultural factors, that contribute to domestic violence involving black men (Hampton, Oliver, & Magarian, 2003; Staples, 1982). Consequently, the thematic findings derived from the SOS focus groups will serve to not only to expand what is known about intimate partner violence in inner-city neighborhoods in Milwaukee but to also increase understanding of how black men attribute meaning to acts of intimate partner violence that occur among African Americans who reside in disadvantaged and working-class inner-city neighborhoods.

Sources of Conflict. Several of the thematic findings reported in this study support findings reported in prior studies exploring the views of batterers generally (Ptacek, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1984, 1998) and studies seeking to uncover the voices of black men who batter (Williams & Becker, 1998; Smith, 2008). For example, the SOS focus group participants reported that conflict over money and jealousy were major conflict triggers that had the potential to lead to acts of intimate partner violence.

Lack of Exposure to Healthy Male/Female Relationships. One of the most significant and important findings emerging from the SOS focus groups that represents an expansion of what is known about domestic violence generally, and domestic violence among African Americans residing in inner-city neighborhoods is the focus group participants accounts of the association between lack of exposure to healthy male/female relationships, father absence, lack of adequate conflict skills and domestic violence. The focus group participants engaged in lengthy discussion of how problematic male/female

relationships that include domestic violence do not occur in a vacuum but emerge as a result of boys and young males growing up in households and social networks where men are relatively absent and largely unavailable to provide an example of how a man should navigate relationship conflict without resorting to verbal abuse or violence against his female partner.

Justifying Violence Against Women. The most significant factor that emerged in the SOS focus group participants' discussion of how men justify violence against their female romantic partners involved their descriptions of men's concerns with maintaining dominance and control in the relationship. It was the view of the SOS focus group participants that even in situations where a man's behavior warranted his female partner's expression of concern or criticism of the man for a reasonable relationship deficiency on his part (e.g. failing to find work, being unfaithful, acting in an irresponsible manner, lacking the capacity to engage in a dispute without resorting to verbal or physical abuse) that men who batter would justify resorting to violence by referencing their belief that they should be the dominant party in the relationship.

Social Media and Domestic Violence. Another major finding emerging from analysis of the SOS focus group discussions was the focus group participants' discussion of how social media use contributes to domestic violence among blacks residing in inner-city neighborhoods. The focus group participants provided very nuanced accounts of the role that social media use plays in contributing to relationship conflict and relationship conflict leading to acts of intimate partner violence. For example, the SOS

participants described scenarios in which female partners may engage in clandestine conversations with other men via email, Instagram, FaceBook and other online formats which they believed could and do could cause conflict in relationships. They also reported that men are likely to precipitate relationship conflict by engaging in similar behaviors.

Problematic Representations of Black Women in Rap and Hip Hop. In addition, regarding social media use as contributing to relationship conflict and intimate partner violence, the SOS focus group participants discussed how the proliferation of problematic, particularly highly sexualized images of black women in rap and Hip-Hop lyrics and videos disseminated on various online formats contributes to relationship conflict. For example, it was the view of the focus group participants that some rap and Hip Hop song lyrics, videos, and some female artist personas encourage women to dress and behave in a provocative manner, that attracts unwarranted attention from other men. This observation is consistent with research that has described some of the problematic female images (e.g., the Gold digger, the Gangsta Bitch, the Ride and Die Chick, the Freak, the Baby Mama) that are prominently represented in rap and Hip-Hop cultural artforms and artifacts (Stephens & Few, 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). They also suggested that some rap and Hip Hop lyrics, videos, films, and female artist personas encourage women to dress and behave in a manner that conveys their availability to be approached and pursued by men. Furthermore, it was the view of some of the focus group participants that problematic representations of black women in rap and Hip Hop lyrics, videos, and film have the potential to erode men's inclination to respect women who fail to present themselves as "ladies."

Consequently, it was their view that how women present themselves has implications for how men communicate with and treat women.

Black Men on Domestic Violence Prevention. The final major area of inquiry and selected thematic findings that will be discussed in this discussion of the SOS domestic violence focus group findings are the suggestions and recommendations that the SOS focus group participants discussed regarding the prevention of domestic violence in the African American community. Of the five major thematic findings emerging from the focus group participants discussion of what should be done to prevent domestic violence, two have the potential to effect significant change in efforts to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic violence in the African American community, including: encouraging and promoting efforts to achieve community accountability for the prevention of domestic violence, including increased efforts to develop and implement anti-domestic violence community awareness campaigns and the implementation of healthy relationship and mentoring programs. What is distinctive about these recommendations is that the SOS focus group participants placed a great deal of emphasis on calling for members of the African American community to claim ownership of the domestic violence problem and to have community members in the forefront of community-based prevention efforts.

Community Accountability. One of the SOS focus group participants major prevention recommendations was that domestic violence prevention in the African American community must

include proactive community recognition of factors that increase the risk of domestic violence, as well as community-based efforts to prevent domestic violence. This particular finding is very consistent with a finding reported by Williams and Becker (1999), in which they reported that their focus group respondents expressed the view that there were very few messages coming from the community that explicitly condemn partner abuse and give direction about what to do when it occurs. However, unlike the participants in the Williams and Becker (1999) study, the SOS focus group participants were very keen on recruiting high profile black cultural influencers, particularly highly respected entertainers and influencers to be involved in the implementation of the messaging disseminated in anti-domestic violence awareness campaigns.

Promote Healthy Male/Female Relationships. Another significant recommendation offered by the SOS focus group participants was their call for implementation and expansion of efforts designed to promote healthy male/female relationships. This recommendation generated more consensus than any of the other SOS focus group recommendations. Essentially, it was the view of the focus group participants that father absence, the lack of exposure to positive male role models, and the subsequent lack of exposure to healthy male/female relationships is one of the most important contributors to relationship conflict and intimate partner violence in the African American community. Related to this recommendation was the SOS focus group participants call for increasing the availability of fatherhood and mentoring programs for at-risk adult males and boys to assist them in making a healthy transition from boyhood to manhood, romantic relationship involvement, and fatherhood.

Community Violence

Sources of Conflict. Most acts of interpersonal violence occurring between black males begin as interpersonal conflict precipitated by some act that is defined by one or both of the antagonists as constituting a social rule violation (Oliver, 1998; Jacobs & Wright, 2006). Consistent with prior research that has examined the causes of interpersonal conflicts contributing to violent confrontations among black men (Jacobs & Wright, 2006; Oliver, 1998; Wilkinson, 2003; Wilkinson & Fagan, 1996; Taylor, 2008), the SOS focus group participants identified and discussed how disrespectful acts, drug use and drug trafficking disputes, gang rivalries, and romantic competition, are major sources of interpersonal conflict among black males, that have the potential to escalate into violent confrontations.

Justifying Violence Against Other Men. One of the most important areas of inquiry in the SOS focus group study, particularly as it relates to the examination of community violence, involved facilitating the participants discussion of “How do men in your community justify committing acts of violence against other men?” This question is important because it was crafted to uncover how black men attribute meaning to the behavior of other men that they feel warrant or justify a violent retaliatory response in the social world in which they reside. The focus group participants identified five thematic responses to the question: Disrespect, Lack of trust in law enforcement, Normalized expectation of violence, self-defense, and the preservation of autonomy. Three of these findings will be reviewed below.

Disrespect. Similar to prior research examining the interpersonal dynamics of violent confrontations among black males (Wilkinson, 2003; Wilkinson and Fagan, 1996; Jacobs and Wright, 2006; Oliver, 1998), the SOS focus group participants were very clear in identifying and discussing their view that many black males are preoccupied with avoiding being disrespected and are willing to resort to violent retaliation against those males who engage in what they perceive as rule violating acts defined as disrespectful. Furthermore, it was the view of the focus group participants that many black males, particularly those who reside in inner-city neighborhoods believe that failure to respond to disrespectful acts may lead to reputational damage in the form of a loss of social esteem and increased risk of future victimizations, as a result of being perceived as weak or a push over.

Lack of Trust in Law Enforcement and Self-Help. One of the more interesting and significant justifications for resorting to violence against other men was what the SOS participants characterized as a “lack of trust in law enforcement.” Similar to a finding reported by Jacobs and Wright (2006) in their study of black men involved in violent confrontations in St. Louis, the SOS focus group participants expressed the view that because black males do not generally trust law enforcement and have negative attitudes toward law enforcement emanating from what they perceive as biased policing practices, they are more likely to seek justice on their own or to engage in acts of self-help, rather than to call on law enforcement to address disputes occurring between themselves and other black males.

Carrying Guns for Protection. In prior studies based on interviews with men who reside in neighborhoods experiencing high rates of violence, many respondents reported concerns about experiencing violent crime victimization as one of their justifications for carrying weapons and/or resorting to violence when involved in disputes with other men (Jacobs & Wright, 2006; Wilkinson, 2003). In a similar manner the SOS focus group participants identified and discussed their collective belief that some inner-city neighborhoods in Milwaukee and particular locations within those neighborhoods are dangerous. More specifically, it was their view that some neighborhoods and particular locations are frequented by individuals who are likely to be carrying weapons and willing to resort to violence to resolve disputes and/or to facilitate criminal behavior in the forms of drug trafficking or robbery.

Social Media Use and Violence. In recent years as a result of the dramatic use of social media, social scientists and journalists have begun to ask questions about the influence of social media on various aspects of social life and behavior. Inquiries regarding the use and influence of social media have extended to an emphasis on how social media use contributes to deviant and criminal behavior, including bullying, harassment, sex trafficking, child sexual abuse, fraud, sexual assault, drug trafficking, and gang violence. Given these trends in the problematic usage of social media, we decided to include a question pertaining to social media postings and use in the SOS focus group discussion guide in order to gain some insight into how black men perceive the influence of social media on black men involved in disputes leading to violent confrontations. Subsequently, in response to the question, “What role, if

any, does social media postings and use of social media play in conflict and violence among men residing your community?” the SOS focus group participants identified and discussed four distinct topics, including: virtual third-party instigation of conflict, symbolic and overt threats, assessment of opponent’s harm capability, and promotion of negative influences in rap and Hip Hop. One of the most important findings emerging from the SOS focus group discussion of the how social media postings and social media use contributes to violent confrontations among black males emerged in their discussion of virtual third-party instigation.

Third Party Instigation. Most acts of violence occurring between black males occur in public and semi-public settings (e.g., streetcorners, vacant lots, in front of neighborhood commercial establishments, parks, drug use settings, and other social settings where inner-city males congregate). As such, it is common for many of these confrontations to be witnessed by third parties. In prior research, it has been reported that third parties who witness violent confrontations among inner-city males tend to assume one of three distinct roles: bystanders, mediators, or instigators (Oliver, 1998; Wilkinson, 2003). Furthermore, it has been reported that the presence of third parties who witness disputes occurring among inner-city black males may have an influence on how individuals involved in a public dispute attribute meaning to the encounter, how they interact with one another, and their willingness to de-escalate or escalate the conflict (Oliver, 1998; Wilkinson, 2003). In response to the SOS focus group question, “What role, in any, dos social media postings and use of social media play in conflict and violence among men residing your community?” the SOS focus group respondents identified and

discussed four distinct themes, including: Virtual third-party instigation of conflict, symbolic and overt threats, assessment of opponent's harm capability, and promotion of negative influences in rap and Hip Hop.

One of the most significant findings emerging from the S.O.S focus groups discussions regarding community violence is that the virtual streetcorner provides black males with a high-profile social setting in which they may insult, disrespect, and even threaten violence against other men, without having to engage in face-to-face interaction in actual streetcorner settings where the likelihood of violent retaliation would be more probable. However, as noted by the focus group participants, in situations where the disrespectful and threatening acts are advanced by a known antagonist, aggressive online behavior may lead threatened or insulted individuals to seek out the virtual antagonist to engage in in-person violent retaliation. Consequently, it was the view of the focus group participants that it is not uncommon for inner-city males, particularly teenagers and young men, to use online virtual platforms to project tough guy personas as a means of threatening men with whom they have conflicts.

Furthermore, as reported by Laugher & Densely (2017) in their study of online gang disputes, the S.O.S findings suggest that the potential for reputational harm is enhanced as a result of conflict-ridden situations being disseminated to a virtual third-party audience that is much more extensive than third-party audiences who typically witness conflict-ridden encounters in actual streetcorner settings. It is in

this sense that the virtual streetcorner provides individuals with a high profile virtual social settings in which they may insult, disrespect, and even threaten violence against other men, without having to engage in immediate face-to-face interaction in streetcorner settings where the likelihood of violent retaliation would be more probable. And at the same time providing an individual with access to a broader audience to target their antagonist for reputational damage.

Fatherhood and Mentoring Programs. For many years in their annual report, Crime in the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation stated that murder was a crime largely beyond the control of law enforcement because it tends to most often occur among persons who are related or acquainted during times when they are engaged in legitimate or hidden from view social interaction. While the FBI no longer includes this statement in its annual report, it is very common today for many violence prevention and reduction stakeholders who have an interest in addressing the disproportionately high rates of violent crime offending and victimization among African Americans to advocate for violence prevention policies and programs that emphasize community involvement (CURE Violence Global, <https://cvg.org/what-we-do/>; Kennedy et al., 2001). Hence, it was not surprising that the SOS focus group participants, inner-city raised insiders, would emphasize prevention strategies – Fatherhood training to combat father absence in the community, expose youth to positive role models and mentoring programs, and Increase access to vocational training and employment opportunities– that seek to prevent and reduce violent offending and victimization among black males by disrupting their passage from boyhood to the streets.

Essentially, the SOS focus group participants expressed the view that father absence and lack of exposure to functional positive male role models serves as a catalyst for many boys growing up in inner-city neighborhood to pursue identities, a sense of belonging, and social esteem through involvement in street-related associations and activities. Therefore, it was their view that community-based programs that provide mentoring to at-risk boys and that assist men develop skills to become responsible fathers are needed to prevent and reduce violence among black males.

Implications

The thematic findings that have emerged from the SOS focus groups have numerous implications for the prevention and reduction of both intimate partner violence and community violence in the African American community. One of the most important implications of these findings is that there are black men in the community who are willing to become involved in community-based efforts to address intimate partner violence and community violence. That is, these men have expressed an interest in participating in community dialogues with at-risk boys to assist them in addressing the issues and conditions inner-city boys and young adult males to pursue significance in the streets rather than through more legitimate and functional means like education and vocational training. In a similar

manner the focus group participants expressed an interest in participating in facilitated conversations designed to improve relations between black men and women.

Another major implication of the SOS findings is that the focus group participants suggested that more efforts should be undertaken to develop and implement violence prevention awareness campaigns that feature credible messengers who possess authentic connections to the African American community. What is significant about this is that, if the SOS focus group participants are representative of other black men residing in inner-city neighborhoods in Milwaukee, this may mean that there are many more black men in the community who would be receptive to anti-violence messaging in the form of community-based public awareness campaigns. As such, it is my recommendation that The Asha Project should partner with End Abuse Wisconsin, the Milwaukee Commission on DV and Sexual Assault, the Milwaukee City Office of Violence Prevention, and other community-based organizations in the African American community to expand implementation of culturally specific public awareness campaigns that include increased emphasis on reaching out to African American males. The SOS focus group findings clearly indicate that African American men would be open to public awareness campaign messaging and to participating in groups designed to enhance the capacity of men to develop and maintain health relationships with female romantic partners.

Furthermore, in order to advance what is known about intimate partner violence and community violence in inner-city neighborhoods in Milwaukee, efforts should be initiated to conduct focus groups

similar to the SOS focus groups with men, and with black women in the community. In addition, given that the mean age of the SOS focus group participants was 45, some effort should be undertaken to interview a younger cohort of black males, to determine if their views on intimate partner violence and community violence are similar or different from those of the men who participated in the initial S.O.S focus groups.

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Appendix

SOS (SAVING OURSELVES) MILWAUKEE VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROJECT FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Introduction and Welcome to the S.O.S Focus Group Discussion

- Moderator Welcome
- Moderator Introduction of Bio/Background
- Purpose and Goals of the SOS Project
- Focus Group Ground Rules
- Consent Form

Intimate Partner Violence

- What are some of the major sources of relationship conflict between men and women who reside in your community?
- What are the social factors and circumstances that are likely to lead men in your community to commit acts of violence against their female partners?
 - **Probe:** What motivates men to commit violent acts against their female partners?
 - **Probe** peer influence, change in life circumstances, mental health, substance use, financial struggles if not mentioned.

- What are the social factors and circumstances that are likely to lead women in your community to commit acts of violence against their male partners?
 - **Probe:** What motivates women to commit violent acts against their male partners?
 - **Probe** peer influence, change in life circumstances, mental health, substance use, financial struggles if not mentioned.
- How do men in your community justify committing acts of violence against their female partners?
 - **Probe:** When men in your community commit acts of violence against women what are they trying to achieve?
- What role, if any, do social media postings and use of social media play in relationship conflict and domestic violence among people residing in your community?
- When men commit acts of violence against women in your community, are there any consequences that they tend to be concerned about?
 - **Probe:** What are some common consequences resulting from committing acts of violence against women?
- What should be done to prevent or reduce domestic violence in the African American community?

Community Violence

Focus: Violence among Men in the African American Community

- What are some of the major sources of conflict between men who reside in the communities in which you reside?
- Why do so many young men in your community carry firearms?
- What are the circumstances that are likely to lead men in your community to commit acts of violence against other men?
 - **Probe:** What motivates men in your community to commit acts of violence against other men?
 - **Probe** disrespect, gang involvement, drug involvement if not mentioned.
- What role, if any, do social media postings and use of social media play in conflict and violence among men residing in your community?
- How do men in your community justify committing acts of violence against other men?
 - **Probe:** What are they trying to achieve when they engage in violent acts against other men?
- In 2021 88% of non-fatal shooting victims and homicide victims in Milwaukee were black. **Question:** How do you explain this?

- What should be done to prevent/ reduce violence committed by and against black men who reside in the inner city?