

Considerations for Responding to Survivors in the Black Community

Contributed by Dana Pellebon, Rape Crisis Center; Marya Simmons, Shift in Notion Consulting; and Ujima Inc., the National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community

*The survivor specific or cultural consideration section is designed to help SART members understand survivors from diverse cultures to ensure all survivors are served with respect regardless of their background. This section is intended to be a tool to help professionals; however, it is the responsibility of each SART member to integrate culturally relevant and responsive care into their services for survivors. It is hoped that SARTs will utilize these considerations to increase their understanding of diversity and learn ways to serve survivors with respect to their cultural background and identities.*¹

In Wisconsin, 7.7% of the population, or approximately 454,000 people, identify as Black or African American alone or in combination.² About 86% of Wisconsin's African American population lives in Kenosha, Beloit, Racine, and Milwaukee. Only Detroit and Cleveland have a higher percentage of African Americans in the Great Lakes region of the United States.³

Black/African Americans are part of the African Diaspora. The term "African Diaspora" describes and acknowledges the mass dispersion of peoples from Africa during the Transatlantic Slave Trades, from the 1500s to the 1800s, and honors Black, African American, African, Caribbean, and anyone else whose lineage is directly connected to the continent of Africa.⁴

Understand the Family Structure:

The separation of Black families during slavery led to the loss of culture, intergenerational trauma, and connection to one's heritage.⁵ During slavery, many people formed new families after separation, but many of them also held on to memories of the loved ones they had lost through sale.⁶ Following the Civil War, former slaves took measures to formalize their family relations, to find family members, and to put their families back together. This allowed for a wide variety of people to be considered "family." Survivors may refer to people outside of their immediate family as: uncle, aunt, sister, or brother due to close family association. It is important to consider inquiring or confirming the relationships that are disclosed.

Impact of Bias and Stereotypes

Bias and stereotypes about the Black community create a high barrier for many Black survivors from receiving culturally welcoming services and responses. To combat bias, a full spectrum of services and resources should be offered so that the survivor and their family can determine what they need. Identifying needed resources and assistance can begin the process of rapport building and trust with the survivor. It is also important to avoid making personal judgments while attempting to understand why the survivor articulates a specific

¹ Georgia Sexual Assault Response Team Guide. 2021. [2021sartguidev2-final.pdf \(svrga.org\)](#)

² United States Census Bureau. *Wisconsin: 2020 Census*. August 25, 2021. [www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/wisconsin-population-change-between-census-decade.html](#)

³ World Population Review. *Wisconsin Population 2023*. Retrieved June 1, 2023. [worldpopulationreview.com/states/wisconsin-population](#)

⁴ University of Nevada, Las Vegas. *The African Diaspora*. Retrieved June 1, 2023. [www.unlv.edu/diversity/black](#)

⁵ The Gathering for Justice. *History of Family Separation*. Retrieved June 1, 2023. [www.gatheringforjustice.org/familyseparation](#)

⁶ Teacher Serve. *How Slavery Affected African American Families*. Retrieved June 1, 2023. [http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/aafamilies.htm](#)

need for assistance. Cultural humility acknowledges that you do not know what you do not know. That is why culturally specific, trauma-informed, survivor-centered practices are essential to assuring access for Black survivors of sexual assault.

Black women have been historically stereotyped into three archetypes: Sapphire (angry Black woman), Jezebel (hypersexualized seductress), and Mammy (maternal caretaker). Confirmation bias may provide a justification for applying these stereotypes, particularly when a survivor is amid a crisis and seeking help. Therefore, utilize best practices to resist perceiving the survivor's trauma response as hostile, aggressive, and/or disrespectful behavior. Validate a survivor's response, let them know they are safe, that you have their best interest at hand, offer time for survivors to process information, and ensure they can make informed decisions based on facts and not fear.

Communication & Engagement:

Engagement with every racial/ethnic population should be individualized and acknowledged to minimize barriers in communication and access to safety and justice. It is critical to ensure that survivors are connected to culturally specific organizations that can appropriately support them and understand their individual and immediate needs.

Be cognizant of language and cultural barriers. Africa is home to approximately one-third of the world's languages. Many members of the Black community may also speak in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (aka slang, Ebonics.) If you are uncertain about AAVE when communicating, acknowledge when there is a lack of understanding on your part. Communication with survivors can be improved when a survivor can see that their realities and identities are respected and not judged.

Identify if interpreters are needed to effectively engage with survivors or if there are language barriers due to a lack of understanding in certain terminology or fear of engagement. Consider that dialects may be different depending on a survivor's country of origin or region within the United States/Territories. If you do not have access to an interpreter that speaks the language of the communities in your jurisdiction, begin the planning, development, and implementation process for a Language Access Protocol.

Health Care System Considerations:

Mental health challenges may also impact communication and engagement. There is a stigma of seeking mental health services within the Black community. The legacy of harm by medical and mental health practitioners outside of the Black community, including but not limited to social workers and therapists, may prevent survivors from discussing or seeking assistance for mental health concerns. Accessing mental health resources for any survivor can be difficult; however, it is important to connect survivors to mental health and/or therapeutic services if requested. Community-based advocates are very resourceful in providing these linkages.

Criminal Justice System Considerations:

It is imperative to incorporate trauma-informed practices at all levels, e.g., law enforcement, prosecution, advocacy, and medical treatment. Initial contact with system-based professionals can change the course of how survivors will engage with criminal justice responders and stakeholders. One negative interaction, in an already uncertain system that may have caused prior trauma, can deter a survivor from trusting or building rapport with others who want to help them. Do not consider a lack of participation as a sign of non-compliance. Consistent communication and empathy offer more transparency and trust. Listening and responding with intention and genuine care and concern can reduce anxiety and fear, but it also displays the commitment to provide safety measures for survivors and hold offenders accountable.

Training and education on bias, intersectionality, trauma informed survivor responses (that recognize historical oppression), and structural/institutional violence experienced by the Black community is vital for all disciplines to be aware of to enhance their ability to engage with survivors in a meaningful way. Training in these areas and the impact of poly-victimization is important as core components of on-boarding for new employees and continued education for current employees.

It is crucial to consider the cultural context of all safety concerns. Validating a survivor's concerns with a cultural lens is critical for a survivor-centered approach. For example, participating in the investigation and prosecution of a case may have grave safety concerns for a survivor, especially if they testify. Also, there may be a reluctance to engage in a system that survivors and witnesses know may disproportionately punish an offender from the Black community with incarceration or a conviction that can have collateral consequences on employment, housing, and education. This is called cultural loyalty and/or collectivism. Sentencing practices and high rates of arrests in the Black community have had a chilling effect on survivors "cooperating" with criminal justice processes. Advocates can collaborate with prosecutors to establish culturally specific safety planning to emphasize that the lived experiences of Black survivors are considered, and the autonomy and agency of survivors are respected.

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