

# Sexual Violence Awareness Fact Sheet

## *African-American/Black Women*

# Overview

*In this fact sheet, we use the terms “African-American” and “Black,” however, each woman chooses how she wants to identify herself. Self-identity is very important and very personal, so it is important to ask an African-American/Black woman how she identifies herself and not make assumptions.*

- In Virginia, 19.6% of the population is African-American/Black, compared to 12.3% of the population nationwide, therefore it is important to understand this community and how best to serve it. *U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.*
- Virginia Sexual Assault Crisis Centers provided advocacy services to 1,766 women in Virginia who were victims of sexual violence in 2003. Of these women, 17% (300) were identified as African-American/Black. *VAdata: A Report from Virginia Sexual Assault Crisis Centers and Domestic Violence Programs, 2003.*
- For every African-American/Black woman that reports her rape, at least 15 African American/Black women do not report theirs. *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. Hart and Rennison. 2003. U.S. Department of Justice.*
- Approximately 40% of Black women report coercive contact of a sexual nature by age 18. *National Black Women’s Health Project.*

*These statistics clearly show that African-American/Black women are experiencing sexual assault at an alarming rate, and often are victimized at a very young age. Yet, due to a variety of factors, it is often difficult for them to get the services they need.*

*It is critical that sexual violence victim advocates in Virginia understand the needs and barriers of African-American/Black women so we can provide culturally appropriate and sensitive outreach and services to this community.*

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# Racism

*Beliefs about race can make it more difficult for African-American/Black women to access and receive appropriate services if they have experienced sexual violence.*

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**Belief:** *African-American/Black women are very sexually active and/or promiscuous; therefore sexual violence probably isn't a big deal for them.*

**Truth:** **African-American/Black women are no more or less sexually active than other groups of women. Sexual violence is about gaining power and control over another through the use of sex. It is demeaning, invasive, and humiliating to ALL who experience it.**

**Belief:** *African-American/Black women are exceptionally strong under stress and are not affected by sexual violence.*

**Truth:** **Like many other women who have experienced sexual violence, African-American/Black women may experience the same array of feelings as anyone else, including anxiety, depression, anger, and shame. Cultural beliefs and upbringing may make African-American/Black women feel less able to show or express their feelings, but this does not mean that the experience is not as traumatic for them as for anyone else.**

**Belief:** *African-American/Black women are accustomed to violence in their daily lives—therefore sexual violence is not that serious for them.*

**Truth:** **Exposure to violence is not related to a person's race or ethnicity in the U.S. Every instance of sexual violence should be regarded as serious. Sexual violence can have both short- and long-term effects on a person's physical and mental health, well-being, and outlook on the world.**

# Barriers

*Everyone reacts to an experience of sexual violence in her or his own way. Due to different cultural beliefs and expectations, an African-American/Black survivor also has feelings or thoughts that are unique to her as an African-American/Black woman. As advocates it is important to understand these differences so we can provide culturally appropriate services.*

## *Protecting the community*

It may be difficult for an African-American/Black woman to seek help if she feels that it could be at the expense of African-American/Black men or her community. Many African-American/Black women are raised to believe they shouldn't "take their business to the streets" or "air dirty laundry," which means they shouldn't expose what happens within the Black community to the larger society. Therefore, it can be particularly difficult for African-American/Black women to use social services, sexual assault crisis centers, or go the hospital, particularly if the people who work at these agencies are predominantly white.

It is important that she feels safe and trusts the person to whom she discloses. Let her know that pursuing help for herself does not detract from her loyalty to her community and remind her that your conversations are confidential. If you sense that she is uncomfortable talking to you, help her find someone else with whom she may better relate or be more comfortable.

## *Fear of mistreatment*

Historically, police and law enforcement have been used to control the African-American/Black community. Instances of police brutality and racial profiling are clear examples of how this continues. A victim may want the perpetrator arrested, but may be reluctant to report the assault for fear of not being believed. She may also fear mistreatment of herself and/or the perpetrator—particularly if the perpetrator is also a member of the African-American/Black community.

Whether or not to report to law enforcement is entirely the survivor's decision. It is important to provide the information she needs in order to make an informed decision. Let her know that support will be available to her no matter what she decides.

## *Pressure to be strong*

Some African-American/Black women are taught as children that they are strong and should bear any burden alone without complaining. Therefore, a sexual violence survivor may have been raised to believe that she shouldn't tell anyone about being sexually victimized.

It is important for advocates to recognize the defense mechanisms that African-American/Black women may have had to build to survive over the years. Respect these survival techniques and meet her where she is. Offer her the space and time she needs to share at her own pace.

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# Helping

## What Crisis Centers Can Do To Make a Difference

- Ensure that all survivors have a safe place to talk about their experiences and get needed services, including shelter if necessary.
- Understand and respond to the individual's need rather than relying on stereotypes or preconceived notions to determine the services needed.
- Recruit volunteers, Board members and staff from the African-American/Black community. This will increase the cultural awareness and sensitivity in your agency and will help with outreach to the African-American/Black community.
- Build partnerships in African-American/Black communities. Reach out to community leaders to build bridges and share information and resources. Listen to their ideas and suggestions on how to best connect with the African-American/Black community.
- Strive for cultural competency in your agency. Lack of cultural sensitivity and knowledge about cultural dynamics may result in alienating victims of sexual violence and ultimately creating more barriers to African-American/Black victims accessing your services.
- Actively work to end racism. Explore and discuss the links between sexual violence and racism. Partner with members of the African-American/Black community to address needs that they define as priority.

## Resources

**Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance** provides technical assistance and support for conducting outreach to underserved populations. The Action Alliance has a Women of Color Caucus to promote and facilitate discussion about sexual and domestic violence and communities of color. [www.vsdvalliance.org](http://www.vsdvalliance.org) 866.3.VSDVAA

**Break the Silence** is a program of the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance, which provides training and resources to the faith community on recognizing and responding to sexual and domestic violence. Resources and public awareness materials are available through this program. [www.breakthesilenceva.org](http://www.breakthesilenceva.org) 866.3.VSDVAA

**Virginia Family Violence and Sexual Assault Hotline** provides 24/7 hotline services for victims of sexual and domestic violence. 800.838.8238 (v/tty)

**Arte Sana** (art heals) is a nonprofit agency for underserved survivors of gender and racial violence that promotes healing and empowerment through the arts and community education. Their website includes fact sheets and resources on direct services and tips on working towards cultural competency. [www.arte-sana.com](http://www.arte-sana.com)

**National Organization of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault** (SCESA) is a Women of Color led nonprofit committed to ensuring that systems-wide policies and social change initiatives related to sexual assault are informed by critical input and direction of Women of Color. [www.sisterslead.org](http://www.sisterslead.org)



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