

Blueprint for Safety Equity Assessments

New Orleans, Louisiana

The question

What is causing the disproportionately high arrest rate of African American women for domestic violence crimes?

Why this question?

This question arose in 2013 when the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) data indicated that approximately 21 percent of all domestic arrests were of female suspects and of those women arrested, approximately 89 percent (of female suspects for domestic violence crimes) were African American women. However, U.S. Census demographic data indicated that as of 2010, the African American population in New Orleans was around 60 percent of the total population. There was a clear disproportionality in the numbers of African American women charged with domestic violence crimes, but it was not clear what was driving it.

Who was involved in answering this question?

Community-based advocates, system practitioners, and local women who identified as African American and who experienced being battered and being arrested for domestic violence were involved. A Disparate Impact Strategic Planning Committee was formed with community-based, domestic-violence advocates, members of non-domestic violence organizations serving the African American community, a victim reparations sheriff's deputy, and a criminal district court judge. NOPD officers were involved in case review sessions of police reports involving Black female suspects arrested or issued warrants for committing domestic violence crimes (also attended by members of the disparate impact committee). Committee members brought together battered and arrested women for focus groups. Graduate-school interns played an essential role in documenting findings, calculating and analyzing data, and conducting an extensive police report analysis over a three-year period.

What strategies were used to answer this question?

An extensive literature review was conducted to try to understand the national landscape of this problem. The Disparate Impact Strategic Planning Committee

also looked at NOPD arrest data, analyzed police reports, held focus groups of battered women and advocates, talked with practitioners, and reviewed the work of other advocates working to end domestic violence in the African American community around the country.

Data Gathered

Tool	Detail
Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The coordinator conducted a significant literature review of writings of African American scholars on African American women, domestic violence, and the criminal legal system.
Data-Gathering: Numbers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NOPD arrest data of all domestic violence incidents by gender and race for the years 2013-17
Learn from Victims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 focus groups of 21 women in 2014 • 6-8 focus groups in 2016-17 (with more than 30 women) <p>Focus group participants described situations where they were being attacked by abusive male partners, resisted the violence by fighting back, and were arrested for it. Women felt keenly that they were not listened to or believed because of their race and gender. They described how community services were not accessible to them either because they couldn't afford them, or, because once they were arrested, they were deemed to be the offender and not eligible for victim services.</p>
Learn from Experts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 formal and numerous informal interviews and focus groups with advocates and other community experts
Case Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 case review sessions of 2013 police reports that included Black female, white female, and Black male suspects • Analysis of 225 police reports (75 reports from 2011, 2012, and 2013 – 25 reports from each

Tool	Detail
	<p>year of Black female suspects, Black male suspects, and white female suspects)</p> <p>The team devised an extensive code book to look for specific features of police reports that contributed to stereotypes and negative outcomes for African American women.</p>
Interviews & Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numerous interviews were conducted from 2013 to 2017 with local women, advocates, and criminal legal system practitioners <p>Some practitioners expressed stereotypical thinking about African American women – a “mad day” theory of the decision to call police, that New Orleans women are particularly violent, and a lack of understanding of how to assess for self-defense or predominant aggressor.</p>

Analysis/Discovery

Five socio-structural themes correlating disparate impact of domestic violence responses and African American women emerged from the literature review:

- The existence and impact of stereotypes of African American women as violent, over-sexualized, or caregivers
- Mistrust of the criminal legal system and/or social services
- Re-victimization of African American women experiencing intimate partner violence by family, friends, faith community, or others
- Lack of cultural competency among practitioners
- Resistance by African American women to identify themselves as victims

Case review revealed several themes that reinforced what was learned from the literature and victim focus groups:

- Officers’ assessment of the credibility of the victim
- Lack of or inadequate assessment of self-defense claims or predominant aggressor analysis
- Failure to uncover the context and history of violence

- How documentation and reporting format contributed to the above themes

Women in focus groups shared their experiences of abuse; some women had experienced years of coercive control and abuse. Their experiences reinforced what was revealed in the literature and case reviews. Women described numerous ways in which they resisted the abuse, not naming these actions as self-defense, but describing what were self-defense techniques – offensive, defense, spontaneous, or planned. Many practitioners viewed Black women in New Orleans as “violent,” “aggressive,” and often more abusive than the men in their relationships (this perception was prevalent before this disparity work began in 2013 and is still very much believed in 2017). Some practitioners believe many calls to 911 result from “mad days” when women are angry at their partner for not paying bills, not caring for their children, or becoming jealous. As mentioned above, many women did not describe their resistance as self-defense. They spoke to officers in such terms as “We got into it,” “I wasn’t afraid,” or “I hit him first.” In addition to perceptions of Black women as violent or aggressive, when officers hear an admission of guilt or aggression by women, they may end their investigation, without inquiring about self-defense or history of violence.

Next Steps & Reflections

What steps did New Orleans take in response to what was learned?

In 2014, the NOPD launched a Blueprint policy that directed officers to first assess for self-defense, and then if no party is determined to have used self-defense, assess for the predominant aggressor utilizing information learned from the Blueprint risk assessment. Reference sheets with the Blueprint risk questions were developed for police, and the electronic reporting system was modified to pre-populate the risk questions to ensure officers’ attention to and documentation of the history of violence.

The Disparate Impact Strategic Planning Committee has also produced an infographic for NOPD describing the experiences of African American women arrested for domestic violence-related crimes. The committee learned that while literally dozens of versions exist of the Power and Control Wheel developed in Duluth, Minnesota, to describe domestic violence, there is no version that depicts the experiences of African American women. The committee took on the task of

developing a wheel and an accompanying practice guide, specific to the experiences of African American women.

What successes were realized?

The committee members were instrumental in the success of the work. They knew intimately the experiences of local Black women who had been abused, and many times, arrested for domestic violence. The committee members' knowledge, passion in advocating for the women in their community, and efforts to support women and children over many years in New Orleans came together in the development of project goals and approach. Every decision made by the committee came after thoughtful and deliberate consideration of the needs reported by African American women. Without the members of the committee, the data collected and police report analysis would have lacked context, meaning, and real lived experience. The Blueprint leadership and the committee emphasized throughout the "importance of the two-way street" as a key strategy. Creating an environment for all team members to see themselves as both teachers and learners enabled the team to pose questions, exchange ideas, and propose solutions creatively.

What limitations or challenges were encountered?

Limited funding to compensate women who participated in focus groups required that the committee reduce the number of participants. There were periods of time where the work stalled and lost momentum: first, in the lead up to the launch of the NOLA Blueprint when the coordinator had to focus efforts on policy adaptation; and again, when the project lacked a coordinator at two different times for a short period. The Blueprint leaders also found that communities who have historically been left out of the conversation or who have experienced one disappointment after another from government agencies were understandably wary of throwing their support behind a project such as this. The team found that extra care had to be taken to not make promises or representations that they could not fulfill.