

BLACK ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Study documents domestic violence by race, income

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Providence, R.I. – Black and Hispanic women, especially Black women in more affluent neighborhoods, are overrepresented in police-reported domestic violence information compiled by the Rhode Island Department of Health, according to a new analysis published in the journal *Public Health Reports*.

Four Brown University researchers found that although Black and Hispanic women comprised 6 percent of the state's 1990 population, they represented more than 17 percent of victims in police reports documenting domestic violence and sexual assault.

The study's authors say that Black and Hispanic women are not more prone to domestic violence in the state. Instead, the findings may reflect a point of entry difference among women. The federal government has funded a handful of states to establish domestic violence surveillance systems since the 1990s, but Rhode Island is the only state with a system largely centered on police reports. Other states rely on court reports or medical documents or a blend of both, says Dr. Wendy Verhoek-Oftedahl, study co-author and assistant professor of community health.

The Brown study looked at whether the risk of police-reported domestic violence varied in relation to a woman's race and neighborhood conditions. It found that White and Hispanic women were less likely to make a domestic violence report to police as neighborhoods became less impoverished and levels of poverty dropped. However, "Black women were as likely to contact police to report domestic violence in poor as in more-affluent neighborhoods," said lead author Dr. Deborah Pearlman, assistant professor of community health.

"We think that White and Hispanic women may take advantage of or have different options for domestic violence interventions," Pearlman says. "This may include contacting a private physician, having more direct access to a lawyer or the courts, or relying on social support from family and neighbors." But this study could not confirm that hypothesis, she says.

The findings of a higher number of Black women reporting to police builds on previous research that showed an increased likelihood that police will make an arrest if the victim and perpetrator are Black, note the authors, who acknowledge that the findings for Black women are complex.

"Race acts as a proxy for discrimination and for the restriction of resources," says Pearlman. "At every level of income, Blacks do not do as well as Whites and Hispanics.

In the U.S. there is a skin color hierarchy that affects education, disposable income, wealth, assets, stability of employment, and health across the life course, even for Blacks living in neighborhoods with similar socioeconomic characteristics as Whites.”

In terms of racial position in society, Black women are the least valued socially and economically, says Dr. Sally Zierler, co-author of the study and professor of community health. “Something about racial positioning also puts Black women at worse danger in their homes than White women. There is a loss of dignity for Black men as a result of racial discrimination. The more disintegrating one’s own context, the fewer places there are to express anger.”