

# Racism & Sexual Violence

## What's the Connection?

Discussions about intersecting identities, oppression, and social justice have been a part of anti-violence movements for a long time. Many movement members have adopted a framework for discussing the continuum of sexual violence within the context of oppression and “isms” (Guy, 2006). The same attitudes and behaviors that allow for sexual violence in our culture are reinforced and rooted in sexism, racism, ableism, ageism, and more.



 **Video:** [Continuum of Sexual Violence](#)

Because mainstream anti-sexual violence organizations have traditionally discussed and addressed the needs and experiences of white women, we've often fallen short when it comes to discussing the connections between racism and sexual violence. The reality is that these social ills are deeply connected. Some of those connections are outlined in this bulletin.

### Risks for Sexual Violence Victimization

The likelihood that a person will experience interpersonal violence, which includes sexual violence, relationship violence, and stalking, increases if they are Black, Brown or Native (Black, et al., 2010). According to the findings from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), 3.5 in 10 White, non-Hispanic women reported victimization in their lifetime. The rate increased to 4 in 10 for Native, Black, and Hispanic women, and 5 in 10 for women who identified as multiracial.

When you look at prevalence rates for men by race/ethnicity, the disparities are even more pronounced. While 2.5 in 10 White, non-Hispanic men reported victimization, 4 in 10 Native men, 3.5 in 10 Black men, 3 in 10 Hispanic men, and 4 in 10 men who identified as multiracial identified a history of violent victimization during their lifetimes (Black, et al., 2010).

Findings specific to sexual violence show much higher rates of victimization in communities of color than the overall national average.

“Over half (53%) of all [African American] study participants indicated rape victimization, and 44% reported sexual coercion within their lifetime, with approximately 42% reporting both.” ([National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2016](#))

In their [2013 Applied Research Paper](#), Carolyn West and Kalimah Johnson provided a critical review of the research on sexual violence in the lives of African American women. They discussed community-based samples of Black women, where prevalence rates of child sexual abuse were extremely high:

- **34.1%** of Black women in a Boston study (Amodeo, Griffin, Fassler, Clay, & Ellis, 2006)
- **65%** of Black women in a Chicago study (Bryant-Davis, Ullman, Tsong, Tillman, & Smith, 2010)
- **59%** among Black female veterans (Campbell, Greeson, Bybee, & Raj, 2008)

Studies that focused on lifetime experiences of sexual violence victimization found that approximately 1 in 5 Black women had been raped (Black, et al., 2010; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). However, specific characteristics and identities can increase the risk of experiencing sexual violence. West and Johnson (2013) described high prevalence rates in studies among Black women who were low-income, HIV-positive, incarcerated, or bisexual, for instance.

Due to social inequalities, including racism, people of color are more likely to experience barriers in accessing safe housing, quality education, and adequate employment. Just one of these experiences increases risk of experiencing sexual violence. More often though, they happen together. The more risk factors a person has, the greater the risk for sexual violence. ([Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \[CDC\], 2016](#)).

## Sexual Violence as a Tool of Racist Oppression

The enslavement of Black African people by White invaders set the stage for racist oppression in the United States. Black women were commonly raped and impregnated during the passage to the Americas (West & Johnson, 2013). It was also common and widely accepted practice for White slave owners to rape their slaves (West & Johnson, 2013). Children born of rape of black women were considered property of the rapist and could be bought and sold as slaves (Brownmiller, 1975).

In the post-civil war era, sexual violence was commonly used to intimidate and incriminate



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Black Americans. Sommerville (2004) discussed how common it was during this period for members of white supremacy groups to gang rape Black women. She also discussed problematic laws that failed to provide equal protection for people of color. In some states, rape was only considered a crime if the victim was a White woman. Vigilante groups and members of law enforcement would routinely use false allegations of rape against a white woman as justification for lynching Black men.

As a nation, we would like to believe that these times of intense racial discrimination are behind us, but that is not the case. Still today we see the aftereffects of discrimination cemented in our legal structures because of a foundation built during slavery and Jim Crow. In his 2014 book, Bryan Stevenson detailed the wrongful accusation and conviction of Walter MacMillian. MacMillian was a Black man from Alabama who sat on death row for years for a crime he did not commit. Many in the community believe he was targeted because he had carried on a consensual relationship with a White woman at the time that a different woman's murder rocked the small community where he lived.

In 2016, the trial of Daniel Holtzclaw brought the issue of sexualized violence as a tool of racist oppression to the forefront of national conversations. Holtzclaw was accused and convicted of using his power and privilege as a police officer to rape and intimidate Black women in the community he served. Many women came forward and described in detail his racially motivated crimes.



## Myths, Stereotypes and Victim-Blaming

Women of color have contributed extensive work exploring the social construction of racist stereotypes about Black Women. These representations are rooted in times of slavery and were used to dehumanize and justify sexual and physical violence against people of color. Collins (2000) and West (2008) each outlined common representations of Black women that have ongoing influence on how we interpret and reinforce myths about sexual violence and victim-blaming. Images of three of those representations, Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire, are described below:

### Mammy

The image of Mammy presents a maternal, asexual, unattractive woman (i.e. Aunt Jemima). Mammy's outlined role is to take care of the needs and wants of White people, forsaking the needs of her own children and family. The image was constructed to justify the presence of house servants and, later, domestic workers in the homes of White people. Because Mammy was asexual, she could not incite the sexual desires of her white masters. The ongoing implication of the Mammy image is that people believe sexual violence cannot be committed against someone they see as a Mammy figure.

### Jezebel

The Jezebel representation presents Black women as promiscuous and always ready for sex. This image was used to justify the systematic rape of Black women during slave passage to the Americas and by White slave-owners (West, 2008). Black women were/are blamed for the sexual violence committed against them because of stereotypical beliefs that they invited this behavior. The Jezebel myth is still used today in media representations of Black and Brown women, and fuels rape myths (i.e. the myth that women of color were "asking for it") (West, 2008).

### Sapphire

The Sapphire image presents Black women as angry and combative. This stereotype is used to negate the words and experiences of Black women who advocate on their own behalf. This stereotype of "the angry Black woman" has also been used to justify police brutality and violence against women of color.

Time and again we see these stereotypical representations played out in media coverage and public commentary about people of color who are victimized. Deep-seated racial stereotypes influence our perceptions and victim-blaming opinions. This often happens subconsciously because of internalized racism that we all experience, even within communities of color.

It's also common for racial stereotypes to be used in political discourse as justification for harmful and discriminatory practices. For example, tropes describing all Mexicans as criminals and rapists are used to justify anti-immigrant policies. For decades, law enforcement agencies have used stereotypes about people of color as inherently violent or criminal to justify the use of racial profiling and "stop and frisk" practices.



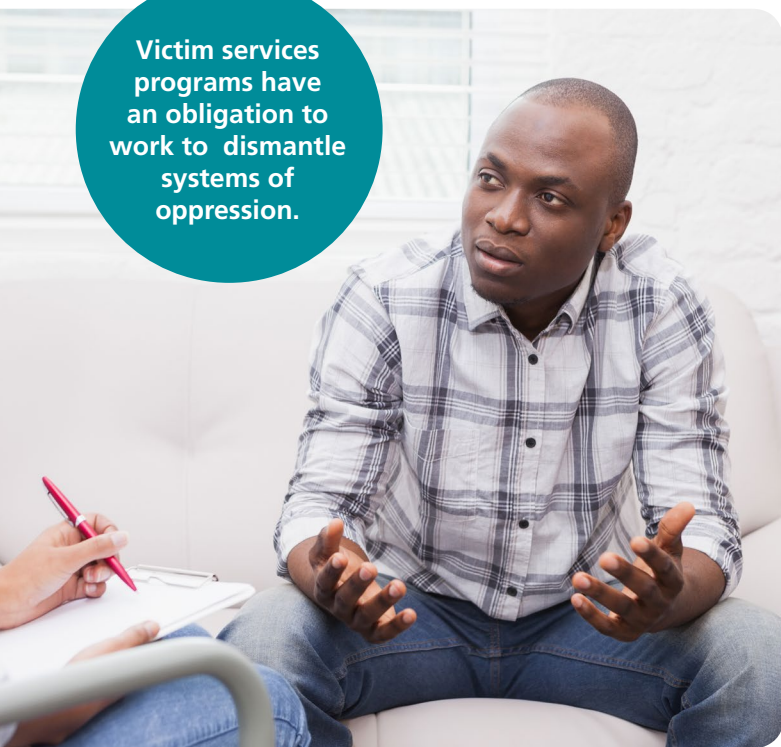


## Acting on the connections

Racism and sexual violence are intimately connected. Sexual violence has historically been and continues to be used as a tool of racist oppression against communities of color. Deeply rooted beliefs and stereotypes about communities of color serve as justification for sexualized violence and systematic oppression. Social conditions and experiences of communities of color have also translated into higher rates of victimization.

At the same time, people of color face distinct barriers and challenges to accessing mainstream victim services. Victim service programs have an obligation to explore these connections and work to dismantle systems of oppression and bias that perpetuate sexual violence and racism. These concepts are discussed in more detail in the accompanying bulletin: **Racism & Sexual Violence: Implications for movement building and victim services.**

Victim services programs have an obligation to work to dismantle systems of oppression.



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