# When Love Hurts

Intimate-partner violence may have lost its place in the headlines, but it remains a leading health issue in the black community and may be on the rise. Here is a look at how and why it's affecting us now.

November 29, 2007 By Chloé A. Hilliard

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A sledgehammer. That is what Brenda L. Thomas's abuser used to shatter her collarbone in front of their 5-year-old daughter. They had a loving, 13-year relationship, Brenda would tell herself after every beating, rape or argument. This incident, however, left her body so mangled that her daughter wouldn't come to her. Her parents traveled from Philadelphia to North Carolina to retrieve her and take her home with them. Still, the broken bones, blood and bruises weren't enough to deter her from marrying the man, who called her "slut," "stupid" and "bitch" and blamed her for his misfortune (they were both addicted to drugs) and cheating.

In the back of her mind she was convinced that he was right. "My self-esteem was crushed," says Thomas, 50, who finally divorced her abuser in 1991. "I started dating him when I was 17. I stole him from my cousin, and I had heard that he used to abuse her but I just thought, 'That couldn't happen to me.'" Had she not broken away she might never have written three Essence best-selling novels—*Fourplay*, *The Velvet Rope* and *Every Woman's Got a Secret*—or her new memoir *Laying Down My Burdens*, about how she overcame domestic violence and its effects. When they were married, her husband had forbid her from writing. "My mind was so warped," says Thomas, "I liken it to slavery."

**New Names, New Faces**

Domestic violence—now often referred to as intimate-partner violence (IPV)—is no longer the exclusive domain of married couples: the alcoholic husband taking out his job stress on his subservient wife. Partner abuse now targets teenage girls, educated women with great jobs, women who don't fit the low-self-esteem profile. The very public case of popular television evangelist Juanita Bynum, who was allegedly attacked by her husband in an Atlanta hotel parking lot, attests to that. And an increased body of research shows it's not just men hitting women—women are hitting back and are often the aggressors.

IPV includes anything from a single episode of violence to ongoing battering—including physical, sexual and emotional abuse or threats. Each year there are about 7.7 million IPV-related physical assaults and rapes, with nearly 38 percent of those cases involving men as the victims. Though IPV rates aren't necessarily higher in the African-American community, its risk factors, which

include low income, unemployment and residing in a poor neighborhood, affect us disproportionately. In a 2000 U.S. Department of Justice survey, 29 percent of black women and 12 percent of black men reported at least one instance of IPV. African Americans account for one third of the intimate-partner homicides in the U.S. and have an intimate-partner homicide rate four times that of whites. And one alarming 1999 report by a researcher at Florida Atlantic University showed that women who opt for a live-in relationship over marriage—an institution on the decline in the black community—are nine times more likely to be killed by their partner.

Research compiled by the University of Minnesota's Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (IDVAAC) shows that black women who are battered have more physical ailments and mental health issues, are less likely to practice safe sex, and are more likely to abuse substances during pregnancy than those without a history of abuse. Children who are exposed to IPV are more likely to be abused, have problems in school and become involved in abusive relationships as adults. And the cost of IPV in medical care, mental health services and lost time at work adds up to more than $8 billion. This almost-360-degree cycle of living with abuse often makes it difficult to recognize the signs.

"We find that people reach out for assistance when there's been a big episode," says Christel Nichols, executive director of the Washington, DC-based House of Ruth, a haven for domestic violence survivors and their children. "Many people have experienced domestic violence their whole lives. They don't see it coming at them. It's hard to explain to these women that this is not normal."

**Teens, Children and IPV**

Alisa Griffin, 25, spent four years in an abusive relationship with her daughter's father before she finally got the courage to get an order of protection. Griffin had grown up in a stable home and was a good student—a cheerleader even. Then she started dating an older boy who was friends with her older brother, who was in college. "He would come pick me up from school. I was on the cheerleading team, [and] we chased after guys like him." Griffin says the abuse wasn't immediate, although two weeks into their dating she tried to break it off, citing their age difference. "He told me he loved me and asked how could I leave him." She relented, watching his jealousy grow. Two years later, the hitting began. They would eventually have a child together.

"The thing that hurt me the most about our relationship was that I knew I was affected," says Griffin, "but I didn't know how much my daughter was affected. In daycare they examined her and found she had been [emotionally] traumatized."

When things got worse and she could no longer hide the abuse from her mother, Griffin called Day One, a New York City-based organization that provides courses, legal counsel and support to young people affected by IPV. They paired up Griffin with a lawyer, who took her boyfriend to court and won her full custody of their daughter. She was granted a two-year order of protection that expires during the fall of 2007; she's already making preparations to move away from the neighborhood they both live in.

**It Takes Two**

There is a growing body of evidence, however, that shows women are not the only victims of IPV. They often fight back and in many cases initiate the violence. Very often the idea of an abused brother elicits chuckles or dismissals of him as a "punk." But the authors of a 1999 report on couple violence published in the journal *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* stated that "within the general population, women initiate and  use violent behaviors against their partners at least as often as men." Other studies even suggest that women are more likely than men to perpetuate partner violence.

At 6 feet 4 inches and 230 pounds, Alonzo Perkins (not his real name) isn't threatened by too many men, let alone women. But one incident with an angry dating partner put his property and his reputation in danger. When the woman, who was visiting from out of town, tried to prevent him from going alone to a party that she had declined to attend, the argument went from bad to worse, with her following him out of his apartment into the hallway of the building.

"She stood in front of the elevator button so that I couldn't push it, and when I tried to gently move her out of the way by her waist, she went off, yelling and screaming even louder," says Perkins, then a graduate student studying art. "I didn't want it to look like I was abusive, so I had to go back in the apartment with her." There, the argument escalated further, with the woman eventually breaking all of Perkins's framed photo work. "For about a half a second I thought about violence. But there's nothing you can do. You can't hurt her, and she's not letting me go." After the woman smashed a bottle of wine on the floor, Perkins left, with her threatening to break "everything in the house." "I was really embarrassed and ashamed about the whole thing. I never dated her again," said Perkins.

Many men don't get off that easy. Findings in a study in the *Journal of Family Psychology* showed that contrary to expectations, 13 percent of men and 9 percent of women in a community sample indicated that they had been physically injured at least once. And one U.K. study showed that men reported more severe assaults than women did. "Girls ask us if it's abusive if both of them are doing it," says Yalitza Garcia, community educator at Day One.

**Full Circle**

Since finding her freedom, Thomas has redefined herself as an independent, successful and drug-free businesswoman and author. But she's upset about the shift she feels domestic violence has undergone in the public consciousness: from a private matter to a national outcry, then back again to something women just don't talk about out of embarrassment or the inability to identify pushing, shoving, slapping or hair pulling as abuse. "Young girls are catching hell," says Thomas, who is now a grandmother of three young girls. "We as older women need to get to these girls while they are young and teach them. Once they have sex it's over!"

Counselors and the criminal justice system also need to develop greater cultural sensitivity when dealing with the issue of IPV in the African-American community, states an IDVAAC report. Many black women are reluctant to report IPV because they see it as a form of community betrayal and want to protect their partner from involvement in the criminal justice system, hold on to needed

income and avoid being socially ostracized. There's also often distrust of a system that can be prejudiced, with many law enforcement officials acting on harmful stereotypes, including the idea that black women are better able to defend themselves than white women. That's why groups such as IDVAAC are calling for community-developed and -based treatment services. It's also critical to teach young people through mentoring and by modeling positive relationships.

"I started taking girls to court and showing them how to get an order of protection," says Griffin. "You'd be surprised how many of them don't know how to protect themselves." Most importantly, she's empowering herself. "I have a hard time having a relationship with a man, but I don't give up," she says. "I am healthy. I really feel like I have a testimony."

*Chloé A. Hilliard recently wrote a feature about domestic violence for* The Village Voice*, where she is a staff writer.*

**MURDER SHE WROTE?**
Since 1987, 22 states have passed "mandatory arrest" laws in IPV cases, which require that all reported perpetrators be automatically arrested. But a Harvard study found that women who live in states with these laws are twice as likely to be murdered by their abuser than women who live in states without them. Head researcher Radha Iyengar, PhD, suggests that the victim's psychological, emotional and financial ties to the abuser along with fear of retaliation actually deter women from calling the police.

**So, is it possible to protect yourself without relying on the legal system?** Tara Nance, a 32-year-old survivor says yes. "First, I was really honest with my family and friends, so I had support. Also, I took self-defense classes and sought help from Family Rescue, a nonprofit agency. They helped me stay strong and on top of my game. It was hard. I had been with him on and off for 12 years, but I finally left him. I wanted to stop the cycle of violence for my children."—Kellee Terrell

**TEEN DATING VIOLENCE**
**It is estimated that one in five high school students has experienced abuse from a partner. Would you know if your child were in trouble?**

**Signs that your child may be a victim include:**

- Bruises, scratches or other injuries
- Failing grades or dropping out of activities
- Avoiding friends and family; constantly thinking about partner
- Sudden changes in mood or personality; acting out, being secretive
- Sudden changes in eating and sleeping
- Difficulty making decisions

**Some signs that your child's partner may be abusive include:**

- Is jealous and possessive
- Wants to get serious quickly and will not take "no" for an answer
- Is controlling and bossy

**How you can help:**

- It is never too early to teach your children self-respect. Communicate that no one has the right to control or hit them.
- Don't judge! Make sure they know that the abuse is not their fault.
- If they don't want to talk to you, find someone trustworthy for them to confide in.
- Don't put down the abusive partner. Point out how unhappy your child has been in the relationship.
- Take all safety precautions. Get your child help with a guidance counselor, school principal or police, if necessary.—KT

**RESOURCES**

**National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH)**
Hotline advocates provide crisis intervention, safety planning, information and referrals to agencies in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. 800.799.SAFE (7233); ndvh.org

**The Domestic Abuse Helpline for Men and Women (DAHMW)**
Founded in 2000, the organization helps men and women in opposite-sex and same-sex abusive relationships by offering support and services.
888.7HELPLINE (743.5754); dahmw.org

**The Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network (RAINN)**
Nation's largest anti-sexual assault organization, RAINN operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline and carries out programs to prevent sexual assault and help victims. 800.656.HOPE (4673); rainn.org

**Battered Women's Justice Project** Provides assistance to defendants and their attorneys to ensure justice for battered women charged with crimes.
800.903.0111 ext. 1; bwjp.org

**Faith Trust Institute** Multi-faith organization dedicated to ending sexual and domestic violence by addressing religious and cultural issues related to abuse.
206.634.1903 ext. 10; faithtrustinstitute.org

If you feel that your life is in immediate danger, call 911.—KT

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