RESEARCH IN ACTION

MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY
Office of Justice Programs

Missing and Murdered African American Women Task Force

Executive Summary

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INTRODUCTION

Black women and girls are uniquely vulnerable and too easily erased from public discussions about missing and murdered people. Statistics paint a devastating picture of the magnitude of the issue: over 60,000 Black women and girls are missing in the United States, and Black women are more than twice as likely than their peers to be victims of homicide.

Only **7%** of the MN population is Black women
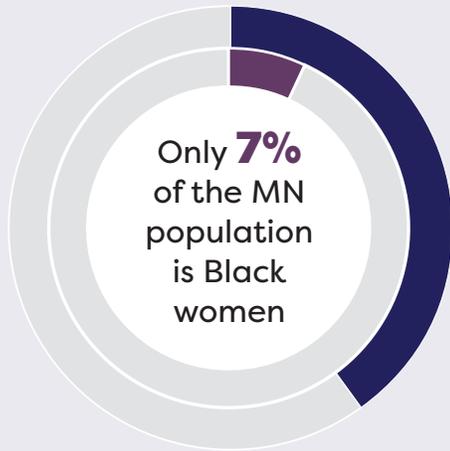
but **40%** of domestic violence victims in Minnesota are Black women

Black women are nearly **3 times** more likely to be murdered than White women in Minnesota

By creating the Missing and Murdered African American Women's Task Force in 2021, the Minnesota Legislature became the first U.S. state to dedicate resources to investigate and to consider the measures necessary to reduce and prevent violence against Black women and girls.

The MMAAW Task Force was charged to examine and report on:

- Systemic causes of violence against African American women and girls

- Appropriate methods of tracking and collecting data

- Policies, practices, and institutions that assist in perpetuating violence against African American women and girls

- Measures necessary to address and reduce violence against African American women and girls

- Measures necessary to help victims, their families, and their communities.

"You have to be bleeding to be heard."

▶ The MMAAW process was deliberately designed to center expertise and knowledge from Black women to better understand the causes of violence and to develop effective practices and policies to increase community wellbeing and reduce harm.

▶ By contracting with RIA, the state of Minnesota embraced a process of community engaged research that centers community members in: defining the issues; making sense of data; and making recommendations for actionable outcomes that lead to tangible, real world changes. The state also agreed to RIA's requirement to convene an MMAAW Advisory Council — made up of Black women and girls who have experienced violence, abduction, and/or trafficking, as well as family members who have lost a loved one to this violence — to guide the process.

RIA

STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

The Missing and Murdered African American Women's Task Force was developed by the Minnesota Legislature in 2021 to investigate violence against Black women and girls and consider the measures necessary to support them, their families, and their communities.

The Minnesota Department of Public Safety convened the Task Force and contracted with Research in Action to conduct research and prepare the final report.

Black women and girls are uniquely vulnerable and often erased from public discussions about missing and murdered people. For years, impacted communities have been elevating this injustice and pushing for solutions – with little support from institutions of power.

In contrast to traditional top-down approaches, Research in Action convened a table of community experts with lived experience to co-create and guide the Task Force process.

Task Force

Created by state legislation, including representatives from government, law enforcement, health and advocacy organizations

Advisory Council

Created by RIA for Black women and girls who have experienced violence, abduction, and/or trafficking; and family members who have lost a loved one

RIA convened and connected the Task Force and Advisory Council to create shared understanding and co-develop the research approach

20 Key Informant Interviews

Literature review

15 Lived Experience Interviews

Findings & Report

In addition to Task Force, Advisory Council and interview participants, RIA invited a broader set of stakeholders and community members to review and contribute to the findings and report.

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CHANGING THE NARRATIVE
An Asset- versus Deficit-Based Approach

Using an asset-based approach, we co-developed the central research questions, interview/focus guides, and demographic data collection forms to disrupt traditional deficit based research approaches that assume Black women and girls are the problem or objects of study. An asset-based approach engages with Black women and girls first as valued members of their communities with the ability to identify solutions to their own problems.

For example, we incorporated different demographic questions into our initial intake and consent process to help our interviewees enter a mindset of articulating their own value and imagining what could be possible for their futures.

For instance, we asked our interviewees to personally describe themselves and how they believe other see them (top image). These descriptors show the multiple different aspects of our interviewees' identities and how they hold those identities close as they live their lives.

We also asked our interviewees what they do to practice self care (middle image). This was a deeply reflective question, and it often turned into a discussion about the mental and physical capacity needed to exist as a Black woman and how self care can be difficult to achieve.

And lastly, we asked our interviewees to discuss what brings them joy (bottom image) to imagine what kinds of things they prioritize in life and get them into a head space of joy and abundance.

mother * friend * survivor
writer * kind * giving
willing to help * mother
non-judgemental
Black woman * love
to cook and spend
time with my family
mother * voice for
the voiceless *
giver * the first
person to call
happy * artist
favorite aunt
survivor
Black
woman

mother * fair * trustworthy
family-oriented
mother * strong
business owner
Black woman
loving * mother
people person
care giver
travel-lover
problem solver
outgoing
child of God
leader * mother
mental health
advocate
winner

Personal Description

WALKS **Self care**
going to the park
"i hug the trees. i hug myself"

resting,
being alone

painting

listening to music
"freestyling to the beat gives me release"

horticultural
therapy

using
essential
oils

saying no

BATHS
with candles

reading
the Bible

sound
bowls

hiking, swimming   long drives   therapy   yoga

prayer & meditation   writing

"i barely practice self care. i am working on it."

"using my experiences, knowledge, and skills to help others heal in my community"

singing and live music

painting   gardening, caring for plants   memories of my mother

trips to
new places   being OUTDOORS

my work

family & loved ones

cooking for my family

helping and
supporting others

my CHILDREN   JOY

From Root Causes to Present Day Realities:
LITERATURE REVIEW OVERVIEW

A mix of historical and contemporary factors contribute to the conditions that have led to a disproportionate number of Black women and girls being missing or murdered. These factors are rooted in slavery and the subsequent racial and gendered hierarchies that emerged from slavery and the legal, social, and cultural practices that justified and facilitated slavery and denial of Black people's humanity.

The system of slavery also depended upon the specific exploitation and abuse of Black women in two ways: (1) as enslaved laborers, sharing that fate with enslaved Black men; and (2) as producers of future enslaved laborers. The law decreed that children of enslaved Black women would "follow the condition of the mother." And indeed, cultural stereotypes that Black women were not good mothers, feminine, or in need of special consideration while pregnant were deployed to excuse forcing pregnant women to work in the fields, selling children away from their mothers, and other brutalities.

The Constitutional Amendments to end chattel slavery did not destroy or dismantle these stereotypes or the rule of white supremacy. After the brief period of Reconstruction, Jim Crow Law and vigilante violence denied African Americans full civil rights and economic opportunities. For Black women, racism and sexism, in law and custom, simultaneously produced unequal outcomes and increased their exposure to violence.

When we look at the issue of MMAAW through an intersectional lens that considers both race and gender, we can see they operate simultaneously within systems, generating disparities that leave Black women and girls more vulnerable to violence than White

> **Understanding the roots of how and why Black women and girls are not as well protected from violence as white women and girls requires attention to both historical and present-day manifestations of interlocking systems of oppression such as racism and sexism.**

women and girls. Four systems that contribute significantly to that vulnerability are: work, housing, health, and the criminal justice system.

Though Black women have historically worked outside of their homes at higher rates than White women, from the end of slavery to the present day they earn less and have fewer opportunities for advancement in the workplace than White men and women. The combination of race and sex discrimination results in the continued concentration of Black women in the lowest-paying occupations and more likely to experience economic insecurity.

Safe, affordable housing is one of the most important factors in quality of life and protection from violence. However, Black women renters and homebuyers have been excluded from equal housing opportunities by segregation, discriminatory landlords, threats of physical violence, redlining, restrictive covenants, and predatory lending practices.

Drivers of disparities and excessive vulnerability

Slavery & Jim Crow **Work** **Housing** **Health** **Education** **Criminal justice** **Stereotypes**

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Black women and girls of all incomes and educational backgrounds suffer worse health outcomes than their white counterparts. Recent research suggests that racial biases in the health care system diminish Black women's health outcomes. Black women in the U.S. are three to four times more likely to die in childbirth, and twice as likely to suffer infant loss than white women. In Minnesota, the maternal mortality rate for Black mothers is double the rate of white mothers; the infant mortality rate for Black babies is more than twice that of white infants.

Recent research illustrates the criminalization of Black women begins when they are girls in school. Black students are punished more harshly than their white classmates for the same behaviors or rule infractions. In Minnesota, Black girls are 10 times more likely to be suspended than white girls. Insufficient mental health resources, teacher bias, and racially biased school policies all play a role in these disparities. The consequences of biased disciplinary actions can be severe, ranging from lower academic performance to early involvement with the criminal justice system.

Continued belief in stereotypes about Black women's hypersexuality means Black girls and women who are trafficked and sexual exploited are often labeled as offenders, not victims. As a result, the factors that make Black women and girls more vulnerable to sex trafficking and other criminal exploitation, like housing insecurity and school pushout, go ignored. Relatedly, many law enforcement and court officers do not perceive Black women as credible victims. Studies of policing, prosecutions, and sentencing reveal differences in how police and prosecutors treat Black women victims. Black women who call for help in domestic violence situations are more likely to be arrested as aggressors; perpetrators who assault Black women are more likely to be charged with lesser crimes than assailants of White women. For these reasons and more, Black women may find it hard to trust law enforcement to protect them or their family members when they are threatened or assaulted.

KEY FINDINGS

For too long, Black women and girls have been speaking and sharing their expertise, but they have not been heard. They have been objects of policy and not agents of policymaking. Research in Action centers community expertise to correct this pattern and aligns with Black feminist frameworks for unveiling insights that can be overlooked when Black women are not centered as experts on their own lived experiences.

Beyond identifying relevant existing literature and insights from key databases, Research in Action, the Task Force, and the Advisory Council collaboratively developed a data collection plan with one-on-one interviews and focus groups to talk to two groups of people:

- Key informants (KI): Experts in key systems or sectors whose specialized knowledge related to Black women and girls experiencing violence, being murdered, or reported missing supports the development of recommendations for the legislature

- Black women & girls with lived experience (LE): Women and girls who have self-identified as a members of the broader African diaspora and have first-hand, everyday experience of violence

THREE MAJOR THEMES:

Hire people who care about & reflect the community

Require training for professionals working in MMAAW-related domains

Increase resources for the work, especially specific support for Black women & girls

Across the Lived Experience and Key Informant data there were calls for more Black practitioners and involvement of Black-led organizations in MMAAW related systems. The analysis revealed how important it is for those staff and professionals to be not only "representative" demographically, but also to have specific competencies and characteristics. Trustworthiness, compassion, and willingness to listen to Black women and girls without judgment, and shared cultural knowledge or lived experience were noted as key characteristics needed within agency staffers.

Lived Experience voices brought to light the problems of culture within the systems, how actors in those systems interact with Black women and girls and how they make them feel: factors that are at the core of why there is a trust problem. The competencies and characteristics LE and some KI spoke of are not inborn, but learned, which suggests a need for improved training and continuing education for new and existing staff. Comprehensive training in areas like cultural competence, harm reduction, and trauma awareness are needed across systems meant to serve victims of violence.

The data illuminated the ways that Black women and girls encounter multiple, disconnected agencies that expect them to have extensive knowledge of rules and procedures, as well as sufficient free time to seek out resources on their own. Training and re-designing delivery of services would remedy some of these disconnects and deliver more comprehensive support.

Across the Lived Experience interviews, there was strong, shared belief that more resources are needed to reduce the disproportionate harm suffered by Black women and girls. This involved garnering sufficient resources that would help prevent violence and harm, such as stable housing and educational programming. The interview data also featured comments about how Black women and girls support each other in crises, often much better than systems do. These observations included a call to direct funding to grassroots initiatives led by Black women who organize mutual aid, or to secure spaces that fit their specific needs.

Many Key Informants spoke about resource scarcity and maldistribution that restricted their ability to work in ways that

> **Staff and professionals to must be more than "representative" demographically — they must have specific competencies and characteristics, in areas like cultural competence, harm reduction, and trauma awareness.**

would better serve survivors, victims, and families after violence has occurred. This included: lack of communication or coordination between agencies; the need for access to data sets siloed in other departments; and efforts to train staff to gather different types of data, particularly to improve reporting and investigation in missing person and homicide cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Six recommendations were developed from the data analysis and facilitated discussion sessions with the Task Force and Advisory Council. These recommendations are proposed to address disparities and harms Black women and girls experience in systems that are meant to protect them from violence or support them and their families in the wake of violence.

Establish a Missing and Murdered African American Women (MMAAW) Office

The issues driving the disparities and harms that make Black women and girls more vulnerable to violence are complex with deep historical roots. Therefore, the report recognizes and emphasizes that a single office cannot solve all of the intertwined social, structural, and individual-level problems that contribute to disproportionate harm to Black women and girls. It is recommended that the physical location be in a community space to increase community trust and to ensure the

development of community partnership and empowerment. Possible functions and scope of an MMAAW Office include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Searching for and partnering with grantmaking organizations willing to create grant opportunities to distribute funds to Black women-led community organizations and new initiatives

- Developing and monitoring effective training and protocols co-designed by Black women and girls to be later mandated for use by local counties, law enforcement, public health professionals, shelters, human service providers, and affordable housing administrators.

- Working with Safe Harbor, the Bureau of Criminal Apprehensive, local law enforcement, and shelters to develop coordination strategies

- Monitor and evaluate efforts to improve coordination of services across agencies

"Get off my back, I'm trying. Instead of shunning me, offer me help. But you tell me I better go do this, or do that and I have 2 days to do that, you know? And then I get everything done and you still won't get off my back. I'm already broken. It was traumatic."
(Lived experience interview)

Create and fund specific spaces and resources to serve Black women and girls

Black women and girls have ideas, based on lived experience and intergenerational knowledge, that, if applied with sufficient resources could generate better outcomes for victims of violence or those who seek supports to reduce their exposure to violence. Direct funds should be allocated to efforts created by and for Black women and girls to address disparities and create new intervention and support models.

Develop effective, culturally appropriate, anti-racist trainings & professional education

Better, consistent training is needed for professionals who work with Black women and girls to build trust and repair historical harms. Training should be relevant to the specific area of service or professional field, and periodic to build skills and respond to emergent issues.

"I have to take off from work to go downtown to this precinct and make this report. And then, while I'm down there I'm asked 'Why did you wait so long to do this?' And then I have to explain everything while also remembering that I am in a police station, so I can't get angry."
(Lived experience interview)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Hire and retain African American staff

Data emphasized the need to hire more people who reflect the community experiences and cultural backgrounds, as well as the retention of existing Black staff to avoid a "revolving door" where burnout leads to departures. Relevant state agencies should eliminate unnecessary barriers to Black applicants; create pathways for African American applicants with lived experience to gain necessary credentials, and; provide professional development resources to retain and support for Black, Indigenous and POC staff.

Design and support better coordination across agencies

Coordinating across the many agencies and offices that relate to issues of MMAAW is key to reducing the frustrations, fears, and roadblocks Black women and girls experience, as well as increasing effectiveness of professionals. This includes providing a range of services in spaces that serve survivors of violence, such as shelters and health clinics; coordinating referrals to other services to reduce the burden on survivors or victims' families; and creating a new statewide missing persons database.

Make emergency and long-term housing accessible and affordable

Black women and girls are the most severely impacted by the housing crisis. Increased efforts to create short term and permanent affordable housing options is urgently needed, including funding for Black or BIPOC specific shelters and emergency safe houses; eliminating prohibitory eligibility restrictions for existing shelters; housing policies that recognize family structures beyond the "nuclear family;" and shelter spaces where older children or vulnerable family members of any gender identity can stay with their parent.

"You gotta go to 15 places to get help. Well, by the time you get to your fifth place to get some help, you're exhausted, you have nothing else to gain."
(Lived experience interview)

"So even when we would want to follow up on something ,we were never even sure who to reach out to, because [if] they don't have that missing person unit, it might take us a while to get down you know, juvenile, or you know, kids who are missing that were part of a custody [situation], just would be in their family and children's unit."
(Key informant interview)

READ THE FULL REPORT

researchinaction.com/mmaaw

ABOUT RESEARCH IN ACTION

Research in Action is a Black queer female-led, multi-racial and gender-diverse social benefit corporation created to reclaim the power of research by centering community expertise and driving actionable solutions for racial justice.

Research in Action was created to disrupt traditional, top-down approaches and reclaim the power of research by putting community expertise first at every step – from naming the problem to identifying solutions. Led by impacted community, we leverage and share our technical skills in research, evaluation and analysis; data innovation; strategy support; relationship and capacity building; and narrative shifting to advance concrete and actionable policy and practice solutions that lead to real and lasting change in our communities.

Learn more at researchinaction.com