

**“WE ALREADY BEEN PURGED”: VIOLENCE AGAINST BLACK TRANSGENDER
WOMEN IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY**

by

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ABSTRACT

Transgender people across the nation are unnecessarily burdened by harassment and violence, ranging from verbal harassment, physical and sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and systemic violence. Some of the most brutally and frequently victimized within the population are transgender women, particularly black transgender women, and are at great risk for downstream health outcomes.

Both the Institute of Medicine and Healthy People 2020 have prioritized improving health equity for transgender people and acknowledge the influence of violence on health outcomes. Given this public health significance, this cultural shift in Public Health has given researchers the opportunity to build a foundation of evidence about violence against transgender people.

A localized study was proposed to investigate the context in which black transgender women experience violence, related health outcomes, protective factors, and resources utilized as a result of violence. Analysis of focus group data conducted in Allegheny County demonstrated locally: common context and motivations for violence, the impact of violence on personal mental health, as well as protective measures used to prevent violence. Within both groups, a complex definition of violence evolved which include micro-aggressions like mis-naming and mis-

gendering, to verbal, physical, and sexual assault. Violent experiences were common in many social spheres such as: on the streets, on public transit, with family, in sex work, by law enforcement, in jail or prison, with intimate partners, and within sexual and gender minority communities. Outing via mis-gendering and mis-naming were frequent pre-cursors to physical violence as well as a component of physical violence itself. Stigma against transgender women was underlying many experiences of violence, and occasionally intertwined with racism.

Women in the groups relied on a number of individual level factors to protect themselves from violence like: hypervigilance, avoidance, educating, ignoring, self-defense, and retaliation. Some of these tactics such as avoidance and ignoring resulted in social isolation and loneliness and may also contribute to downstream mental health issues discussed like: depression, anxiety, and suicidality. This study concluded that structural level changes to reduce stigma locally and broadly are necessary to ameliorate the impact of violence against black transgender women.

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PREFACE

A project such as this requires and deserves careful consideration, planning, and implementation; people of color have historically been left out of research as participants and contributors, and taken advantage of as research subjects and collaborators. Even projects which aim to serve the needs of people color fail to consider the utility of having projects spearheaded and facilitated by people of color. The necessity of conducting public health research is real though, in order to develop knowledge of health disparities affecting minority populations and to support structural changes, such as increased funding allocation for programs that reduce those disparities. In this particular instance, to do such research with a critical lens requires awareness of what privilege I bring to the table as the author, how it can be used and how it should not be used. With that in mind, I have made every effort to make this a collaborative project to uplift the voices and stories of black transgender women.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The word transgender, though used and understood in many different ways culturally, is used here to describe a person whose gender identity differs from their assigned birth sex, for example a person who identifies as a woman and was assigned a male sex at birth is transgender. Current literature conservatively estimates that transgender people make up 0.1-0.5% of the population, though the actual number is impossible to ascertain and likely higher than this estimate due to underreporting for fear of safety and confidentiality [1]. The threat and experience of violence has a firm grasp on the safety and health of transgender people. For the purposes of this paper, violence is defined as verbal, physical, sexual, or systematic mistreatment. One study of violence against transgender people reported that 40% of participants expected a shorter lifespan as a result of violence [2]. Black transgender women (black trans women) face an unparalleled risk for violence within this population as a result of multiple stigmas, and the perceived reduction of lifespan is possibly higher [3, 4]. Characterizing the most severe of the violence experienced by black trans women, A 10 year report of murders of gender non-conforming people under age 30 found that the majority of murder victims were black trans women [5]. In addition to the risk and perceived threat of bodily harm and death, violence is a contributing factor to many health outcomes for transgender people such as substance use, HIV, depression and suicidality [6-11]. This disturbing evidence illustrates ways in which violence perpetuates health inequities, thereby reducing quality of life and casting a bleak outlook on the lives of black trans women. If any dent

is to be made in the inequities facing these women, exploratory research needs to be conducted to address and explore the context in which violence against black trans women occurs, how it impacts health outcomes, and protective factors against violence in this population.

This thesis will serve as a starting point for such research in Allegheny County, and will support intervention programming and promotion of health equity for the transgender community likely most severely impacted by violence: black transgender women. Because of the author's location and access to organizational resources in Pittsburgh, the research will be conducted in Allegheny County in Pennsylvania. Focus groups are also a cost-effective method for exploratory research and as such will be the primary mode for data collection. Participants for these focus groups will be recruited from the community at large in Allegheny County with support from organizations that provide services to black trans women, which with the author has ties.

2.0 BACKGROUND

Harassment and victimization is an issue that plagues all transgender people, but particularly black trans women. For the purposes of this paper, black is used to describe people who identify as African, African-American, black or of mixed race. Determining racial proportions of transgender populations is not feasible, and research of violence particularly against black trans women is limited. Thus, literature will be discussed as it relates to transgender people overall, and will elaborate further where evidence stratifying for race and gender are available to further characterize the implications for black trans women.

Inclusion of gender identity in national surveillance data continues to lag, though one entity was successful in collecting data from a large, national sample (n=6,450) of transgender people [14]. The sample was fairly evenly distributed between transgender women and transgender men (with a small number of participants identifying as gender non-conforming), which allowed for characterization of victimization (among many other issues) for the transgender population as a whole as well as comparison of victimization experienced by gender. The remainder of the studies included come from smaller samples with more specific topics, often catering to a segment of the transgender population or a very specific issue. The exceptions to these are two systematic reviews, one on HIV and the other on violence [3, 6]. Unless otherwise indicated, all of the studies cited in the background sampled only transgender individuals.

The studies cited emphasize a variety of categories of violence and utilize different measures. Though violence may be construed as anything from micro-aggressions¹ and verbal harassment to murder, the literature in this review emphasize: physical assault, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and family violence. Some of the measures account for victimization motivated by gender identity, race, and other factors, while others simply measured the prevalence of violent experiences. There may also be some overlap due to varying definitions of violence. For example, one paper specifically defined domestic assault as violence enacted by family members, while others used the term domestic assault without defining the perpetrator of violence as family or intimate partners. Both domestic violence and intimate partner violence are included here, because while they often mean the same thing, they were differentiated in the studied papers by violence enacted by partners (intimate partner violence) versus violence enacted by family members (domestic violence.)

¹ Coined by Columbia Professor Derald Sue, micro-aggressions are: “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color.” The term has been socially re-defined to mean the same indignities experienced by various marginalized communities, including transgender people.

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.1 Prevalence of Physical Assault and Associated Outcomes

In a study of 6,450 transgender people, (8%) of respondents reported being physically attacked or assaulted in places of public accommodation, while black respondents suffered the highest rate of assault (22%) [14]. In the same study, 66% of those who were assaulted reported experiencing homelessness [14]. In one statewide survey of transgender health needs, 38% of respondents reported having been physically attacked since age 13 [15]. The impact of these types of assault has also been found to have a negative impact on mental health outcomes for both victims and other members of the population. Utilizing data from the Youth Risk Behavioral Survey in Boston and mapping city wide hate crimes, Duncan and Hatzenbueler found that LGBT adolescents (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) who reported suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were more likely than heterosexuals to live in neighborhoods with higher LGBT assault hate crime rates [16].

2.1.2 Prevalence of Domestic Violence and Associated Outcomes

Of the types of violence examined, the evidence regarding domestic violence against transgender people may be the strongest. In the Injustice at Every Turn study, 19% of all transgender respondents reported domestic violence by a family member because of their transgender status. That rate was higher for black respondents (35%), and black trans women reported the highest rate of domestic violence overall [14]. Though tragic, these prevalence rates are not surprising

given the issues many transgender people navigate when coming out to their families; Rejection by family members is common and also occurs frequently for transgender women [14].

Domestic violence was shown to have a significant and damaging impact on health outcomes. Forty-eight percent of those who experienced domestic violence experienced homelessness, compared to 9% of those who did not [14]. Twenty-nine percent of victims have been incarcerated, compared to only 11% of non-victims [14]. Thirty-eight percent of those experiencing domestic violence worked in the underground economy for income, compared to only 11% of non-victims [14]. Specifically, 29% percent of domestic violence victims did sex work for income, a rate over four times higher than non-victims (7%) [14]. Sixty-five percent (65%) of domestic violence victims attempted suicide, compared to 32% of non-victims [14]. Forty-seven (47%) of those who experienced domestic violence reported drinking or misusing drugs to cope, compared with 19% of non-victims [14].

2.1.3 Health Outcomes Related to Sexual Assault

Sexual assault experiences were measured less frequently than other types of victimization and thus prevalence is unavailable. However, health outcomes related to sexual assault were measured in some studies and the impact of them is damning. In one study of transgender people, sexual assault survivors reported a suicide attempt rate of 64% [14]. In a study of Latina transgender women, victims of sexual assault were 1.91 times more likely than those who did not report sexual assault to be moderately or severely depressed ([11]. Clearly more research is needed in order to determine the prevalence of sexual assault that transgender women of color experience.

2.1.4 Health Outcomes Related to Intimate Partner Violence

Data regarding the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) was not available for transgender people, though some associated health outcomes were. In a study of HIV risk factors among transgender women, IPV was significantly associated with unprotected anal intercourse, HIV+ status, and poly-substance use [17]. This also was true for a systematic review of HIV risk factors among transgender women, which found IPV to be associated with HIV risk [18].

2.1.5 Murders

In 2014 alone, 12 transgender women were known to be murdered; one for each month of the year and most of them were women of color [19, 20]. The collection of national data on the murders of transgender people is limited to what is tracked in news coverage, so these numbers are likely a severe underreport [5, 21]. As of February 2015, there were already 6 known murders of transgender women of color ranging in age from 21 to 46 years old, quickly outpacing last year's rate [19]. Three of these women were murdered by intimate partners, and 4 of the 6 women were black or of mixed race [19]. A recent 10 year report of murders of gender non-conforming people under 30 found that the majority of murder victims were black trans women[10]. Given the likely small population size, the rate of murders is a very real and immediate threat to the livelihood of black trans women.

2.1.6 Violence by Law Enforcement

Law enforcement are supposed to be a source of safety and support in light of violence, but when citizens distrust law enforcement their resources are useless. Distrust of law enforcement is high among transgender people; forty-six percent of respondents in the Injustice at Every Turn study (n=6,450) reported that they were uncomfortable seeking police assistance [14]. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that 22% of respondents reported harassment by police, with higher rates reported by people of color (38% of black respondents reported harassment, 15% report physical assault, 7% report sexual assault, all at the hands of police) [14]. Additionally, 41% of black respondents reported being held in a cell because of their gender identity alone [14]. The high rate of distrust and mistreatment by law enforcement likely contributes to underreporting of crimes against transgender people and may be a contributing factor in the downstream health outcomes related to violence.

2.1.7 Intra-Community and House and Ball Scene Violence

Intra-community violence may occur between members of minority communities like gender and sexual minorities. This may look like in-fighting over personal disputes, or may be a part of a larger tension around political issues such as racism against gender and sexual minority gender people of color within gender and sexual minorities, or mistreatment of transgender people by cisgender² community members. Knowledge of intra-community violence involving black trans women in Allegheny County is supported by anecdotal evidence collected by the organization

² Cisgender is used to describe people whose assigned sex birth aligns with their gender identity.

collaborating on this project, Project Silk, an organization serving many black transgender women in Allegheny County. Project Silk staff have been made aware of violent altercations between black trans women as well as between black trans women and other members of black gender and sexual minority communities. Staff describe many of these altercations in the context of House and Ball, a scene integral to black gender and sexual minority communities. House and Ball is about both community and events, finding its roots in black drag events of the 60's, which eventually expanded performance categories to give room for others to participate [22, 23]. Balls are performance events in which individuals compete in a variety of categories playing on gender and sexuality. Houses are not physical, but used to describe a group who competes in and host ball events. Houses members compete against one another at Balls both individually and in groups. Local Houses are often a great source of support for members who are otherwise ostracized by friends and family for their gender or sexual orientation [22, 23]. Ball events are a valuable tool in bolstering the pride and celebration of black gender and sexual minority identities, which often find themselves poorly represented and respected in gender and sexual minority communities dominated by white people [22].

However, the competitive nature of House and Ball culture is known in many communities for fostering tension and violence. While some Ball members may enact violence on others due to conflicts in competitions, others may do so for reasons of jealousy over partners, in retaliation for stealing, or to assert oneself in a proactive manner to stave off future violence [22]. Additionally, violence may be due in part to the tension that exists between members of certain gender and sexuality categories. Butch queens are gay or bisexual men in the House and Ball community, and make up the majority of the scene [22]. They also often comprise most of the leadership in the community and thus have a lot of sway in the categories for balls [22].

Categories for butch queens vary from sexualized, such as butch queen sex siren³, to non-sexualized, such as executive realness⁴, among many other categories requiring a great deal of creativity and skill such as sewing and fashioning one's own garments. Categories for black trans women, known as femme queens in House and Ball, are usually limited to those that focus on a transgender woman's ability to adhere to feminine beauty norms and standards or those that sexualize transgender women, such as sex siren and femme queen realness⁵ [22]. The availability of these limited categories can be due in part to a leadership of butch queens in House and Ball that reinforces societal norms pressuring transgender women to adhere to strict standards of femininity, and which fails to recognize the diverse skills, talents, and interests of black trans women [22]. Such oversight may breed discontent between butch queens and femme queens, and consequently lead to violence. Additionally, House and Ball serves as a space for black gender and sexual minority people, who are often impoverished, to access a class experience not available to them while actively subverting it through performance. Consequentially, that sometimes looks like the reinforcement of harmful social and gender norms such as those described for femme queens, or transgender women.

³ Those participating in sex siren categories should exude sexuality associated with their gender category, so for butch queens they should exude male sexuality. For transgender women, the category of sex siren means that they should also meet body norms associated with cisgender women like curviness and having large breasts.

⁴ A butch queen performing executive realness should dress and appear as a privileged business man, and in doing so should be able to be read as a straight, successful class-privileged man.

⁵ Realness in general references a person's ability to mimic and be read as the associated category, like with executive realness mentioned above. For femme queen realness, this means they are judged on their ability to be read as cisgender women.

2.1.8 Legal Protections

The law and legal system have not been on the side of transgender people when it comes to violence. This undoubtedly has a significant impact on black trans women, who are likely the most vulnerable of the transgender community to violence. Law and policy affect transgender people's ability to report crimes, have legal recourse for hate-motivated crimes, and access support services like shelters after a crime has occurred. Insufficient legal protections also impact the tracking of crimes against transgender people, leaving most evidence and knowledge of these crimes to self-reporting by victims. In particular, hate crime laws only recently (2009) included gender identity and expression as categories for reporting, and to date there has not been a federal report of hate crimes against transgender people [21]. State-level hate crime laws also vary widely and most states do not include gender identity and expression as reportable causes of a hate crime [12, 24]. Of the few that do, none (as of 2007) required tracking of such crimes [21].

As mentioned before, the level of trust of police by transgender people is unsurprisingly low given that law enforcement is often included in the list of perpetrators of violence against transgender people [3]. In one study, a transgender respondent had this to say about the police:

I got raped at 18 because they wanted to set me straight. I went to the police and the police said to me, "he who lays with dogs should expect to get fleas," that's what I got. So from that moment on I knew the police were never gonna help me [3].

Poor relations with law enforcement like in this example contribute to the dismal reporting conditions of violence against transgender people [3].

The legal system is also predominately on the side of perpetrators of crime against transgender people. In ALL states except for California, a perpetrator may use what is called the "gay and transgender panic defense [25]." More specifically, a perpetrator may claim that the

victim's sexual orientation or gender identity not only explains but also excuses a loss of self-control and a subsequent assault or attack [25]. Perpetrators can, and have been fully or partially acquitted of criminal charges and hate crimes against transgender people using this defense [25]. In 2002, seventeen-year old transgender girl, Gwen Araujo of San Francisco was brutally murdered by several men after they discovered she was transgender [26]. In trial, the defendants invoked the "panic defense," claiming that the discovery of her genitalia in conflict with her feminine presentation caused such a startled reaction that it excused her murder [26]. With this defense, the men were acquitted of the hate crime charge and received reduced murder charges for the beating and strangling to death of the young woman, whose body was "hog-tied, wrapped in a blanket," and buried in the desert [26]. Since Araujo's murder, California is the only state to have enacted a ban on the panic defense. Not only is it terrifying for transgender people to know that a person can claim such a defense in nearly all states, but this is particularly troublesome for black trans women, who make-up most of the victims of murders of transgender people in the United States. Even in death, transgender people, especially black trans women may not find justice for the terrible crimes against them.

Protections for transgender victims of violence seeking emergency shelter are increasing, but are still limited and often complicated. Federally-funded housing (including temporary shelters) are prohibited from discriminating against someone for their sexual orientation, but not for gender identity [27]. Only 18 states have prohibited temporary shelters from discriminating by both sexual orientation and gender identity [27]. In recent cases, transgender people have been found to be protected under the federal fair housing law under the category of sex discrimination, which covers temporary shelters [27]. Whether that recent precedence has trickled down to actual access to services in temporary shelters remains to be seen. It is quite

possible that transgender women in particular, seeking to escape a violent home situation, may be turned away from valuable resources, such as women's shelters, for not being perceived as "real women." Because there are very few, if any resources for transgender people in violent situations, transgender women may be left with minimal access to resources that can assist them in escaping from domestic violence.

2.1.9 Summary

Transgender people, particularly black trans women, experience high levels of physical assault and domestic violence as well as adverse health outcomes from all types of violence, including sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Depression, suicidality, substance use, sex work, and homelessness are correlates to many of these types of violence for all transgender people. Systems in place meant to protect people from violence such as law enforcement fail transgender people tremendously, especially black transgender people. Legal protections and recourse around violent crimes against transgender people are also lacking, and those such as the "gay and transgender panic defense" are very harmful to black transgender women. Tensions within black gender and sexual minority communities and the House and Ball scene (Ballroom) may also contribute to violence, which is unfortunate, given the role that Ballroom plays in supporting black transgender women who have been ostracized or even disowned by their family and friends. The high incidence of violence against black transgender women and known adverse outcomes suggests these women are uniquely vulnerable to downstream health outcomes related to violence. More needs to be known about the context in which such violence occurs and how black trans women cope with violence in order to better serve victims of violence and to prevent violence overall.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Several public health and feminist theories will be used to guide the analysis of the results. These theories overlap in many ways but each brings a unique characteristic that is valuable to the analysis. The feminist theory of intersectionality lends insight into how the layering of multiple marginalized identities can lead to unique individual and systematic oppression [28]. Minority stress theory suggests that discrimination individually and systematically can impact one's health, and the social ecological model recognizes that there are multiple spheres of influence from the individual to systematic level in which a person might experience acceptance, discrimination, and barriers to accessing care [29, 30]. Link and Phelan posit that health conditions with behavioral risk factors are most largely affected by social conditions such as class, and that systematic interventions which reduce such differences will be most effective in eradicating these health conditions [31]. These theories will be instrumental in deconstructing the context of violence against black trans women to understand at what levels of social influence violence occurs, how black trans women's intersecting marginalized identities influence their experiences of violence, and how the stress of this violence can impact the health of black transgender women. With contextual information about such violence, Link and Phelan's theories will inform recommendations for systematic change to eradicate violence against black trans women.

3.1.1 Minority Stress

A sizeable fraction of the transgender population is impacted by violence of all types. For those within the community who do not experience violence, such victimization elicits fear as a result of having similar identities to victims. The weight of this fear is easily characterized by the proportion of transgender people that fear for their safety; in one study 76.6% of transgender people reported feeling unsafe in public settings [6, 8]. When fear is so pervasive in a community it undoubtedly will impact one's ability to navigate day-to-day life, negatively impacting personal and psychological well-being [32]. This day-to-day stressor of being a stigmatized and marginalized minority is a burden on mental and physical health, which is supported by Meyer's minority stress theory. Meyer's theory proposes that stigma and discrimination foster a hostile social environment, placing excess stress on marginalized groups [29]. This theory is extensively supported by literature on health outcomes of sexual minorities, including transgender individuals [29, 33-38].

3.1.2 Intersectionality

The complex interplay of having multiple marginalized identities also needs to be considered when discussing the importance of research on violence against black trans women. For black transgender women, the burden of marginalization is three-fold; in no particular order, first as a racial minority, second as a woman, and thirdly as a transgender person.. Intersectionality is a useful theory in examining how the layering of identities, such as race, class, and gender, inform social experiences and suggests that the marginalization one person experiences for a particular identity is unequivocal to forms of oppression experienced as a result of a different identity. For

example, the oppression a white transgender woman faces for her transgender identity may be very different from that of a black transgender woman, whose experience of oppression based on her gender identity can be intertwined with racism.

3.1.3 Social Ecological Model

While many think of experiences of discrimination as occurring at an individual level, it is important to consider how violence and victimization are institutionally and systemically sanctioned. Using the social ecological model, we can see that social influence exists at multiple levels beyond the individual [30]. Spheres of influence exist in a person's immediate community which may include family, friends or neighborhood; organizationally, such as groups a person is involved in, and in society, from institutional structures such as school, religion, and government [30]

When we have a better understanding of where or how discrimination appears systematically, we are then better equipped to recognize what is at the root of stigmatization for a particular identity. For example, stigma that transgender people experience is usually a result of the perceived transgression of socially acceptable gender norms, whether in appearance or presentation of personal identification that conflicts with one's appearance (i.e. a driver's license which indicates male sex for a person whose presentation is feminine.) Social sanctions for transgressions of gender from masculine to feminine are especially harsh, as demonstrated by some of the previous evidence in the background. The existence of transgender women threaten many people's, especially men's perceptions of masculinity. Overall, such stigma is embedded into policy such as hate crime legislation, non-discrimination and healthcare policy, the frameworks of organizations that provide support to victims (i.e. crisis centers and shelters), and

systems like law enforcement [3, 39-43]. For example, many women's crisis shelters have policies that exclude serving transgender women, despite the impact of intimate partner and family violence previously discussed.

3.1.4 Social Conditions as Fundamental Causes of Disease

Public health interventions often aim to decrease health disparities as a result of structural discrimination through individual level interventions; one example might be a program that provides vocational job training and professional development for racial minorities, whom often experience racial discrimination in employment and hiring practices. Interventions such as these are valuable and much more feasible to implement, but are low-hanging fruit. Drawing from Link and Phelan's theories, the neutralization of risk factors through structural interventions will yield a greater impact on health outcomes than interventions at the individual level [31]. If individual level interventions only treat the symptom of a larger problem, a new symptom is bound to emerge while the underlying illness is still infecting the system at hand. This is why when we look at disparities such as violence against black trans women with the intent to develop interventions, it is critically important to examine where structural level interventions may be possible.

4.0 METHODS

This study was designed to fill gaps in literature and knowledge of the context of violence against black transgender women through a localized project. Of the literature addressing violence against black, none characterize violence at a local, community level, and such evidence may provide points for structural interventions that consider specific community needs. For that reason, focus groups were proposed to be conducted with women living in Allegheny County and to explore: the context in which black trans women experience violence locally, preventive factors, reporting conditions and disclosure of violence, service utilization as a result of violence, and impacted health outcomes. The author has a relationship with Project Silk, a local organization providing services to the population of interest. This study (ID:PRO13100323) was approved by the IRB at the University of Pittsburgh (see Appendix A.)

4.1.1 Recruitment and Participants

2-4 focus groups with 6-10 participants each were proposed. Participants were eligible for inclusion if they self-identified as black and as transgender women living in Allegheny County at the time of the focus group. Participants were recruited from flyers and posts made online by Project Silk to social networks such as Facebook groups. Participants received a \$20 incentive for participating in the entire group, or \$10 for participating in a portion of the group. Due to the

sensitive nature of the topic and vulnerability of this population, appropriate measures were taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of participants in keeping with IRB requirements. Participants were also offered referrals to support resources prior to and after focus group discussions.

4.1.2 Data Collection

Groups were held at Project Silk, a safe environment known to many of the participants, and after-hours to ensure privacy and safety. All participants were asked to complete a brief, anonymous demographic questionnaire. Each group lasted about two hours. For the second focus group, a participant from the first group was invited back to encourage participation from other group members. She helped to informally facilitate the discussion but her contributions were only included from participation in the first group, and she was not included in the count of 4 participants for the second group. Both focus groups were co-facilitated by the author, who has trained in focus group facilitation, and a Project Silk staff member with extensive qualitative interviewing experience, and knowledge of and relationships with the target population. Each focus group was recorded with consent from all participants and recordings were transcribed into word documents by two transcribers. Personally identifiable information was edited out during the transcription process. Audio and word documents containing the transcriptions were kept on a University of Pittsburgh shared drive keeping with IRB requirements, and recordings will be destroyed when research on these data is complete.

4.1.3 Topics of Discussion

Focus group discussions sought to elicit evidence in a local community about: the context in which violence against black trans women occurs, how black trans women respond to violence and its impact on health and wellness, and what resources are accessed as a result of violence. Sample questions include: “What kind of violence do black transgender women in Pittsburgh experience and how might they protect themselves in these situations?” and “how do people in your community deal with this violence?”

4.1.4 Analysis

Each transcript was read through by the author at least twice prior to coding. Utilizing themes from the literature review and themes suggested by the Project Silk staff member, the author conducted a content analysis and coded the transcripts using qualitative analysis software (Nvivo). Newly emerging themes were also coded and included in the analysis. The author will share the content analysis with both Project Silk staff and focus group participants prior to publishing results to ensure accurate representation of community-specific issues.

5.0 RESULTS

5.1.1 Participants

All focus group participants identified as black, male-to-female transgender women. Several participants also identified as mixed race and Native American. 6 participants identified as straight, 1 as bisexual, and one did not respond to the sexual orientation question. Half of the participants said their annual income was less than \$10,000, one made \$10,000-19,999 a year, and the remaining 3 made \$20,000-29,999 a year. Five participants had obtained a high school diploma or equivalent, 1 had some college, 1 had a college degree, and 1 did not complete high school. Participant ages ranged from 19-45 with the majority of the participants being in their mid 20's.

5.1.2 Overview of Findings

Discussions were prefaced with a definition of violence as “actions that may hurt someone emotionally or physically,” but participants in the groups were free to define and determine what actions constituted violence. Participants from both focus groups named experiences of violence

as subtle micro-aggressions like mis-gendering⁶ and mis-naming⁷, verbal harassment, to emotionally abusive behavior by intimate partners, and physical and sexual assault. It is important to note that most literature does not define micro-aggressions and verbal harassment as violence.

For women in these groups though, understanding how non-physical actions like micro-aggressions and verbal harassment are intrinsic to experiences of intimate partner violence, physical and sexual assault was important. In fact, several different women in both groups named instances of verbal harassment and micro-aggressions as a, “*sense of violence*” or simply stating, “*that’s violence.*” It’s as if to say terms like discrimination and victimization do not capture the serious damage that such actions wreaks on these women’s lives; micro-aggressions and verbal assault are interwoven into the physical forms of violence experienced. As such, one cannot do justice to the topic of violence against black transgender women without including micro-aggressions and verbal assault in the discussion of violence as a whole.

Women in the groups described violence ranging from micro-aggressions and verbal assault to controlling and manipulative abuse by partners, stabbings by clients while doing sex work, and other serious threats to their physical and mental well-being. Incidents of violence occurred in a variety of environments and at different time points, such as with family during childhood and adulthood, on the streets, or on public transit. Perpetrators of violence also varied from close family members and intimate partners to casual acquaintances, sex work clients and strangers on the street. Women cited various strategies for dealing with violence like avoidance, retaliation, and ignoring harassment. Adverse health outcomes discussed included impact on

⁶ The incorrect use of gender pronouns, ex. Using he or him pronouns to address or talk about someone whose chosen pronouns are she or her.

⁷ Addressing someone by the name they were given at birth, which does not align with their gender.

one's mental health, depression, and suicidality. HIV was also discussed as a factor that amplified risk for violence as a black transgender woman.

5.1.3 Interpersonal Violence

5.1.3.1 Family

Of the women in the groups, many referenced difficulties with family members as their first experiences of violence. Some experienced physical assault at the hands of family members before being kicked out of the family home, while others endured embarrassing experiences being outed by family in public. For one participant, the rejection came at a very young age, *“when I was 13, I told my parents I was gay and they kicked me out of the house, and then they gave up custody of me to the state, so that was it for them.”* The same participant cited early experiences being “caught” in women’s clothes before she was kicked out and the physical repercussions:

One time, my mother, she came home from, she had forgot something on her way to work, and I'd been in her stuff, you know I had on her shoes, I had on her fur coat, I was walking around the house smoking a cigarette and she comes poppin' in and next thing I know she's beatin' me up, literally beatin' me with a belt. And I think I got extra beatings just because they were afraid, they thought they could beat it out of me.

In early transition, other women cited degradation from their mothers for their feminine presentation, *“the very first time my mom had seen me dress...she was like ‘you look completely ridiculous and you need to take it off.’”* For those participants that mentioned an active relationship with family members, many were burdened by frequent mis-gendering, and verbal

harassment by close and extended relatives in private and public. This participant described struggles early in her transition with harassment coming at her from all sides:

When I started transitioning and coming out, we were fighting all the time, they were trying me, and that turns into even more situations, putting ourselves at more violence because I started running away, I didn't wanna be at home. My mom's calling me a faggot, my dad's calling me a faggot, my brother's calling me a faggot, my step-dad at the time was calling me a faggot, when everyone in the household does that, that's a sense of violence.

The same woman struggled with difficult experiences in public with family members, describing a trip to a grocery store in which an elderly relative she was helping, repeatedly and actively mis-gendered her to the checkout clerk, despite her incongruent gender presentation, leading to a humiliating outing experience:

We're sitting in the grocery line and they're like "oh, he has the card" and the cashier's lookin' like, "what, who?" And it's kind of like "give him the card." I mean I've cried, I've screamed, I've swore, I've left family events.

Additionally, participants suggested that misuse of names and mis-gendering was not simply a mistake, as presently many of them have been in transition for years and often "pass" to the general public. Participants believed that such acts were intentional:

...We really be like female, so for them it takes a lot for them to be like "he." If we're around them all day and stuff, we got all this girl stuff, this is how we live, like they've gotta go out of their way to be like "he/him." Y'all goin' out of your way just to do this.

A common form of violence that arose in family relationships was rejection, whether that was of the child's transgender identity or the literal rejection of that child from the family, being

cast out onto the street. Rejection was expressed in family members' inability to accept their child's relationships and mis-gendering out of anger:

My mom was the bad one. I asked her the other day "can my boyfriend come over?" and she always say "no, I don't want them demons in my house." And then when she gets mad she'll call me by my [boy] name, just doin' little petty stuff.

See, I think my family would have been okay with me just being gay.

My mom says, she said, "I think if you had just stayed a boy..."

The impact of harassment, violence and rejection by family members was clearly profound. For one, the violence inflicted on her by family had a more significant impact on her well-being than the same violence inflicted by someone else, *"I could take that from the billions of people in the world, but I cannot take that coming home, from my own family in my comfort zone."* For some, the degradation and pain is the price they pay for family relationships. As one participant put it:

I've been through a lot of physical abuse from my father, emotional abuse from my mother, and my family whenever I first told them I was trans. They didn't really want to accept it. I fought so hard for the approval of my family, to this day. And it's so crazy, cause I've come to the conclusion that that's what I do. But I still do it, I still fight for the approval of my biological family.

Rejection by family members resulted in loneliness, and the power that family relationships hold over a person is significant, as this person describes how conversely, non-family relationships hinge upon the other person getting their needs met:

I felt like it didn't have anybody, I don't really have my family, I can't really depend on my family cause my family isn't really comfortable with my situation. For somebody who

doesn't have a family, it's hard for me, I don't have people who I can just call on a consistent basis like, "oh watsup, whatchu doing?" Like in my situation you gotta have something, you call one of my friends you gotta have some weed or gotta have some liquor, or you gotta have some money, or wanna go out or something like that.

Another woman cited how such rejection by her family and resulting loneliness led her to relationships with people that put her in other vulnerable situations, such as with sex work, and that the absence of family relationships in her life enabled this vulnerability:

That's who I met and they pushed me into that life and I was young, I didn't have my family, I didn't have nobody else to tell me, "do this," "do that." And as an adult, I see I missed out on my childhood. I missed out my childhood cause I was hoeing and trying to survive. And I didn't have no childhood.

Abuse by family members can take many forms, including manipulating or coercing family members into dangerous trades such as sex work. One participant described how a mother manipulated her transgender daughter into sex work:

There is a girl and her mother supports her trickin'. Her mother is a drug addict, and her daughter is bringin' in money. She wants her cut because her lights and gas will stay on if she can get her hits. It is sad that you are encouraging your daughter to do that to take care of you, and she even made the statement, "I took care of you for 18 years. It's time for you to take care of me."

The participant even described the mother's likely sexually abusive role in this relationship, assisting in the filming of her child's sex work, *"she's actually the person holding some of her cameras. To see your parent holdin' that camera and supportin' you and on your bed and you're like 'this is really me.'"* This is a less explicit form of violence against black

trans women by family in that the mother didn't abuse the child directly but is important nonetheless; rather this family member contributed to the sexual exploitation of a minor, thus playing a role in family-perpetrated violence.

These women described multiple forms of violence by families against black trans women from micro-aggressions, verbal harassment and rejection, to physical and sexual abuse. This violence may foster internalized transphobia and low self-esteem. Some of these women were also disowned by their families at a young age, made homeless and forced to support themselves. Homelessness itself is a high-risk for violence and other adverse health outcomes, but mostly it is a risk for these women because it may force them to enter the sex trade for survival. Sex work may also serve as a proxy for acceptance and validation from clients when it was lacking from family.

5.1.3.2 Sex Work

A majority of the participants disclosed experiences as sex workers, a number of whom turned to sex work as a means of survival after being rejected by family members, "*I was homeless, I didn't have nowhere to go, so my only option was turning back and making some money...*" Black trans women's participation in sex work for survival after rejection and violence by family members, in combination with a desire to gain acceptance and validation where it was previously absent, makes black trans women highly vulnerable in the trade. Their need to do sex work to have the resources to survive may make them more likely to participate in transactions that put them at higher risk for violence which others have the luxury to decline. Similarly, a desire for acceptance and validation may make the trade of sex work more appealing to black trans women. Sexual transactions are a literal means of gaining validation of one's body and identity from sexual partners in a world that persecutes transgender people for their non-normative bodies.

Unfortunately, many men who seek out black trans women for sex work likely have their own internalized phobias regarding gender and sexuality, and may lash out against black trans women, believing that their desires to have sex with transgender women makes them gay or bisexual. Others may specifically seek out black trans women to assault them because of their transphobic views. Racism could also be at play here, considering the high prevalence of murders of transgender women of color in the United States [5, 19, 20]. These women stressed the challenges of ensuring their safety in an environment where men are known to assault transgender women for a variety of reasons, and many cited experiences of violence in sex work:

I have been raped, I have been beat up and robbed, I've had a gun put in my face, I've been maced, I've been everything done to me, that violence, and I didn't even report it. I dealt with it and moved on to the next city, and it is very deadly within the sex industry.

Women in the groups do attempt to protect themselves by preemptively outing themselves to clients, but sometimes this is dangerous. Several women had stories to share that suggested men intentionally sought out transgender women to attack them:

I would always say "you know I was born a boy," just so you know, and they'd say, "oh, I knew" or "it's okay, c'mon," you know whatever. But then there was this one incident where this guy wanted to go to uptown, and we went to the alley and he said "I'll be right back" and he went and opened his trunk, and I jumped, and he was pulling out a baseball bat, and he chased me down the alley.

Women felt that certain types of calls like the one mentioned above- working the streets, and others like outcalls (going to a client's location), were particularly dangerous given the unexpected nature of the environment and inability to control the situation. Several women referenced their fears of working the streets and outcalls for this reason:

I'm scared to be down here.

The only reason I hate them [outcalls] is because they hold the power there, cause when they come to me I control the whole scenario, how it goes down, when I do it, how I wanna do it, if I wanna do it.

Participants faced retaliation when there was a possibility of a client being outed for his interest in transgender women. The same woman who was chased with a baseball bat described a transaction with a customer when his friends were in another room and barged in, unexpectedly outing her to his company in the process:

All of a sudden this dude came in and the first one was like “oh, you shoulda seen this, he was tryin’ to fuck me, this is a dude.” His friend ran out of the house and then this dude tried to fight me, he was tryin’ to get it out, I had to tase him and he finally left.

Regardless of the protective measures an individual woman can take to protect herself in a transaction, clearly there is risk in all types or locations of transactions, and one woman alone cannot protect herself from the risk inherent in sex work. In the case where an assault has occurred, one might expect for law enforcement to advocate on behalf of the victim. None of the women in the groups disclosed that they sought help from law enforcement after an assault, and in fact several described distrust and fear of law enforcement around sex work, which will be discussed later.

One woman described her breadth of violent experiences in sex work from being raped, beaten up and robbed and unable to report the violence describes and the impact on her sense of self, “*years and years of doing that, it broke me down. I felt so empty inside, I felt like I was worthless, like nobody can ever love me.*” This woman’s inability to trustfully report her assaults

in sex work transactions to law enforcement characterizes the cyclical nature of violence against black trans women in the sex trade.

From these women's stories, it is clear that violence is implicit in sex work for black trans women, and the ability to gain legal recourse for assault is limited due to mistrust of law enforcement and actual experiences of violence by law enforcement. However, interventions to deter black trans women from sex work may not be the most appropriate course of action, as for many women and some in this group it is a valuable source of income and necessary for survival. Interpersonal experiences of violence in sex work will continue to be pervasive so long as systems in place meant to protect victims have the effect of protecting offenders instead, such as with the "gay and trans panic defense [25]." The ways in which black trans women are made vulnerable in sex work, such as inability to report assaults, rejection by family and need for survival work, must be considered to decrease violence in sex work against black transgender women.

5.1.3.3 Intimate Partners

Though not everyone in the group identified as straight, all conversations about intimate partners referenced men. Partners mentioned were casual, new, and/or long-term, and violent experiences with these partners ranged from verbal abuse and physical assault to abusive controlling and isolating tactics. Some women asserted that they were active participants in partner violence, acting out against their partners as well. Most accounts suggested that acts of violence against these women by a partner were in self-defense rather than as abusers themselves.

One woman easily described the conundrum of navigating relationships with men, "*either they tryin' to get with you or they tryin' to get at you,*" suggesting that men will only make either a romantic or sexual pursuit of a transgender woman, or attack her. Participants were

open about the abuse they experienced in past relationships. One woman offered, *“I’m a survivor of an abusive relationship, I have a scar to prove it.”* This openness colors the frank anecdotes shared regarding issues such as: navigating dating and when to out one self, partner retaliation for fear of being outed as a partner of a transgender woman, addressing men’s fear about their sexuality, and abusive controlling behavior.

5.1.3.4 Intimate Partners- Dating and New Partners

The challenge of dating new partners while transgender seemed to be the first hurdle that many of the women struggled with in relationships. This meant having to decide if or when it was safe to out oneself, whether that was upon initial meeting of a potential partner or after the relationship was established. Women expressed difficulties coming out at any stage of a relationship. One woman jokingly suggested wearing a shirt that says “I’m trans,” and another participant responded that she actually owned the shirt. In the exchange below, several women explore the difficulty and danger of introducing oneself as transgender to potential partners:

If I’m talking to a guy and he’s like “oh baby,” I mean if I go to a straight bar and a guy’s tryin’ to talk to me and what not, I’m like “honey I’m not your kind of girl,” and if he asks “why?” I’m like “okay baby well I’m a transgender female, I was born a male, but I’ve been a woman my whole life.” That’s what I like to say.

I don’t even think giving them that explanation of “I was born a male” because you weren’t born a male, you were born transgender. So giving them that explanation would make them get offensive, make them get a little dangerous.

And you know the craziest part, when you meet a guy, the first thing is like let’s have a conversation, they wanna touch your piece right between your legs, I’m like, “no.”

And those types of things turn into violence too.

Yeah they definitely do.

The women here infer that there are some men who may use such an introduction as an opportunity to enact hate-motivated violence, or that it might attract men who are only interested in objectifying transgender women for their bodies. One woman suggested that men may retaliate violently against black trans women in response to ignored or rejected sexual or romantic advances. Her comments are reflective of the de-valuing that black trans women face and intrinsic to intimate partner violence; treated as sexual objects undeserving of autonomy and respect. These examples illustrate some women's fears of repercussions when outing themselves upon meeting potential partners. Subsequently they consider waiting, like for this woman who discussed weighing her fears against her desire to get closer to a potential partner with another woman relating to the sentiment:

If you talk to a dude, and y'all having good conversation, what if I tell him then? Maybe this will change somethin'. So then you really don't want that, so you don't say nothin'.

And you don't wanna say nothing but then he says "you should've said..."

These women are faced with the painful choice to trade safety for trust and intimacy, recognizing that there is a potential to be treated or viewed differently and even violently by partners once outed. In favor of savoring the relationship untainted by partners' objectifying, hurtful, or even dangerous thoughts about black trans women, some women waited. Waiting did have serious consequences for some. One participant described the potentially fatal outcome of waiting to out one's self:

But this is the thing. I saw this girl just the other day, she was on the phone with (name) and she was like, "we could do this, we could hang out and watch a movie, and all this

kinda stuff, but we ain't gonna fuck." And I knew exactly that this dude had no idea, what her T⁸ is. But this is how girls get killed.

The suggestion here is that regardless of the necessity of keeping one's transgender identity private, concealing it from a partner may result in violence. Such violence is often socially justified by the idea that concealment of a transgender woman's identity from a man is tricking him, and particularly tricking him into being gay. One woman described how she learned to be more cautious a result of a relationship with a guy that nearly ended in violence for her withholding her transgender identity. After an acquaintance unknowingly outed her to her partner via a fake social media profile, she joined her boyfriend for a talk near his work, unaware that she had been outed and the danger to come:

We're sitting outside, and he just comes out with the cut, "so are you a man?" and I was like, "what?" He says "are you a man?" and I'm like no. So he's like "man we're gonna go in this alley way and you're gonna pull your pants down," and I was like "I'm not goin' anywhere in an alley, I'm not doing anything." He just kept asking me and I got so irritated with the situation that I was finally like "yeah, I am," and he's like "you f'real?" and I said "yeah, I'm dead ass serious." I don't know what in him clicked cause everything still seemed okay but something in him just snapped, and he just looked at me like, "I laid down with you and I did this that and the other." And then he pulls out this knife and all I could think is I don't get to say goodbye. I don't know what saved me or how he changed his mind but he was like "you know what, you go your way and I'm a go my way." And he walked up the street and I walked down the street, and when I hit the corner I flew. In them heels, in everything I had on. I was scared, I was like "oh my god,

⁸ This woman is referring to whether or not a person knows her transgender status.

and he knows where I live and like he could come back, he could change his mind.” I never did it again.

Her boyfriend’s anger and threat of violence suggests homophobia and transphobia; his disgust and expression of deceit shows he believed having slept with her would say something about his sexuality. Regardless of the presentation or identity of a woman, the thought of being attracted to someone who has, or used to have a penis incites fear and anger in many men. Additionally, inherent in these thoughts are an invalidation of transgender women’s identity as women, reducing women to their genitalia and assigned birth sex.

The need to out oneself to potential partners is complicated by how one’s gender is read by strangers and society at large. Some transgender women “pass” easily and their womanhood is never questioned, while others “pass” inconsistently and may simply assume that they are visibly transgender. As a result, in some situations outing oneself didn’t seem necessary as the women were not aware that they “passed” to a potential partner; that he read her as transgender. This woman described what it’s like to meet a man on a day when she thinks she does not “pass”:

You have a little bit of a [5 o’clock] shadow, you’ve got a scarf on, you in your pink sweat suit that you haven’t washed in a few days, but you’re just goin’ to the store to pick up a couple things and you meet this cute boy, and so you automatically just assume he knows. And then you get all dolled up, you went on a couple dates, or go out a couple times or you all chill a couple times and then it comes down to facts or something, and he’s like “whoa, what is that?!” And you’re like “I thought you knew. You mean to tell me you didn’t see that 5 o’clock shadow when you picked me up at the store? Can’t you see that?”

Describing social norms around gender expression, she expected this man to read her as transgender given facial hair, and was surprised that he “didn’t know” of her transgender status. While the idea that transgender people should “pass” to fit socially constructed gender norms is harmful notion, the inability to know how one is being read makes navigating new personal relationships difficult and potentially dangerous.

A clear theme in all of this is that dating men who are unfamiliar with dating transgender women, unaware of their transgender status, or unwilling to be out as a partner of a transgender woman can be unsafe; if violence were to occur, it would be easy for a partner to justify such violence by saying he “didn’t know” or was “tricked” into believing she was cisgender. One woman in particular describes how she avoids dating men who are down low; men otherwise unwilling to be socially out as partners of transgender women, *“that’s why I typically try to stay away from down low boys because if they kill me, and I’ve never been around their family, they’ve never met mine or my friends, it’s easy to say ‘I know he tried to trick me.’”* Her fear that a down low man could justifiably get away with her murder is possible. Such a legal defense as discussed previously, is currently accepted in 49 out of 50 states and has been used successfully to escape hate crime charges [30].

5.1.3.5 Intimate Partners- Long-term Relationships

In addition to the risk of hate or phobia-based violence with new partners as just described, transgender people are likely victims of intimate partner violence [3]. Because of the various social stigmas that transgender people face, partners can use these vulnerabilities to control their partners, whether it be threatening to out a partner as transgender, or capitalizing upon someone’s pre-existing social isolation from friends and family. In long-term relationships, several women in the groups shared stories of abusive, controlling behavior by their partners.

This woman discussed being locked in a room by a partner, and suggested her vulnerability as an opportunity he took advantage of:

When I was living with (name) we used to fight all the time, and I think it had a lot to do with his insecurity as a man and me providing for a lot of things. He tried to control my money, my apartment; he tried to control everything I was doing. He tried to take advantage, at that age I was at a raw spot, cause I didn't know where my mind was or what the hell I was doing. This was my first place, I'm just being who I am so I'm still new to this, and he got me at the perfect time for him. And I would get locked in closets, locked in bedrooms. He would take some rope 'cause there was no lock on the bedroom [door], and tie it around the doorknob and take it all the way to whatever he could get it around so I couldn't pull the door open. He would take my money, my phone, and leave me there all day, like all day, I wouldn't eat nothing, thank god the bathroom was in the room so I could drink some water, but I would be in that room all day, then he would come in the house and open the door and be like, "you feel better?"

Noting her newness to living authentically as a woman, the participant implied that her partner at the time took advantage of her vulnerability to exact control over her, literally locking her away without access to the outside world while he was gone. Having previously discussed a lack of social support and community as a result of her identity, it's likely that this participant was just isolated enough that others were not aware of the abuse. The experience of lacking support systems is common to transgender people, especially black trans women, and therefore makes them more vulnerable with abusive partners. Additionally, for those who seek to transition medically or legally, partners may use their financial support as a method to keep transgender partners in an abusive relationship. One participant in the group found herself being

controlled by a partner because he had the means to support her and the medical costs associated with her transition:

There was a lot of things where I couldn't do nothing, I was controlled, he controlled me with money. He knew he controlled me with money because when I met him I had nothing so he's the one that started my transition.

The stress of navigating safety in one's ability to be out in relationships, live authentically, and pursue medical and/or legal transition is high, and even led this woman to disclose her overall avoidance of intimate relationships with men.

I don't have a boyfriend, never had no boyfriend, I don't even know if I want to be bothered with that scenario cause that's just too much... I just don't look at people the same way, I don't trust people. I don't trust these guys, especially these guys they're killing these girls, like what's the fucking point, like I got a lot goin' on, like you know what I mean?

In addition to the known risks around intimate relationships discussed, this woman's inability to trust men as intimate partners is consistent with the reality that half of the known murders of transgender women of color in 2015 as of February have been by intimate partners [19]. She also cites that her own needs are enough of a challenge as it is, the risk of danger in intimate relationships simply is too much for her and not worth the struggle. Given the previously mentioned issues around family support and associated risk for violence in sex work, barriers that black trans women face in accessing healthy, intimate relationships further prevent them from accessing social support necessary to survival amidst violence. Such relationships could serve as a vital support system where it is often lacking, and partners can reinforce one's ability to live authentically in a world that often violently challenges transgender women's

authenticity. Unfortunately, the stories told are a haunting depiction of what local black trans women have to face in navigating intimate relationships, from: fear of violence around when to out oneself to a partner to the potential for financial, emotional, and physical abuse by controlling partners who capitalize on black trans women's vulnerabilities.

5.1.4 Violence in the General Population

Black transgender women interface with many aspects of the general population on a day-to-day basis, and are forced to navigate many social situations in which their perceived transgressions of gender norms are socially sanctioned. The women in these groups described violence from the general population in the form of: subtle micro-aggressions and assault on the street and in public transit, mistreatment by law enforcement, and altercations in straight bars and clubs.

5.1.4.1 Straight Bars/Club Violence

Bars and clubs are important social spaces for many young adults like some in these groups. In particular, some participants noted that their relationships with straight and cisgender people were important and found themselves in straight bars and clubs as a result. Black trans women found themselves to be in the minority when in the company of their straight, cisgender acquaintances at such establishments. This presented challenges when participants ran into acquaintances that knew them prior to transition. One woman described how such a situation can place her in a dangerous situation, particularly when seeking potential partners:

I'm from here, and I've been goin' around parts of the city, and people think they know me, know who I am, may have been. It's always that, like a girl or a guy you went to school with, or maybe somebody who knows your family. "Oh, you're so and so's son."

Bitch, no no. S'cuse me. You're putting my safety in jeopardy, cause you don't know who I was eye-fuckin' over here, you know what I mean? You don't know if this bartender is giving me drinks from a guy over there and now you're up here putting my business out here and now their ego is hurt. That's where the violence can come in, the disrespect, the verbal.

This participant suggested that the verbal disrespect of being mis-gendered and mis-named by an old acquaintance could stir internalized feelings of homophobia in a potential partner. Others experienced abuse indirectly when they heard straight, cisgender friends in these spaces use homophobic and transphobic slurs or jokes. One woman touched on how her primarily heterosexual social circle bring her shame, particularly when she hears homophobic and transphobic remarks from them in group settings like at bars:

I go to straight bars and even my co-workers, and my current friends, females and males, I'm not that intimate with. So I feel like you don't need to know my information, and that's a type of circle I have now. I don't have a circle of, and I wish I did, I wish I had trans sisters. But honest to god I don't. My circle really revolves around the heterosexual community, and I'm ashamed of that, and I'm ashamed of it just because, I can be sitting in a group of straight people and they'll start talking about faggots, and they'll start talking about trannies, and I'm sitting there like...

Highlighting a lack of community with transgender women, this participant falls back on her primarily heterosexual and cisgender circle who use charged slurs such as tranny and faggot. Both of these anecdotes reflect: a lack of safe alternatives to straight bars/clubs that fosters community among black trans women, the lack of trust among black trans women, and the difficulty in forming intra-community supports.

5.1.4.2 Street Violence

When it came to street violence in Allegheny County, participants' views varied depending on the neighborhood. Both groups mentioned downtown Pittsburgh as a site of frequent incidents:

Cause there's places you can go where people are just like, "I don't care," and then there are some places where you can go and you have things being thrown at you from everywhere and you're just like, like I'm just goin' to the store. Downtown when I started working down here, (laughs) that's when it got a little spicy.

Following on that comment, another participant described how she navigates specific areas of downtown to avoid urban areas. More than anything, being in proximity to a busy street like Penn Avenue seems like an important component to street safety. In addition to describing certain aspects of downtown, this participant suggested that children and youth were frequent perpetrators of harassment against black trans women:

There's certain places where if there's no boutiques and little coffee shops, I don't walk on that street, like I'm not walkin' where all the urban weird stores are at. I'm not goin' to be on Wood [Street] unless I'm looking for trouble, there's nothing down there for me. I'll do Penn all day, there's nothing but condos, hotels, and little boutiques and restaurants and that. It just depends where little kids are gonna be. It's usually young kids, young black people every time, it's the younger people.

These comments spurred a flurry of others in agreement about street harassment by youth and children:

Oh, they'll spook you every time!

They're terrible.

"Mommy, mommy, that's a man!"

*Yeah, little kids, you really want to punch them in the face?
I don't like little school kids either. "Are you gay, are you a
man?"*

Following on this conversation about harassment by youth, one woman cited gay bashings as a type of violence enacted by young college kids, *"Cause you know in my day we were getting gay bashed. You know, there'd be groups of little college kids coming with baseball bats and they'd jump you as you were coming out of the gay bar."* What's not mentioned here but can be suggested, is that racism likely plays a role in such attacks. This is supported by the disproportionate number of transgender women of color who are violently attacked, particularly those who are murdered in hate crimes [3, 5, 19].

5.1.4.3 Public Transit and Transportation

As harassment on the streets was mentioned previously as a risk for black trans women, some women in the groups suggested that having a car or reliable transportation is key to avoiding unwanted harassment on the streets. For many though, cars are not available and public transportation or taxis are the only option. As a result, altercations or harassment may occur in transit to various locations. Several described incidents on buses or at bus stops with strangers. This woman described the stares she has received on buses when read as transgender and how that can turn to verbal harassment and assault:

Someone will start mad doggin' you, and that means looking at you with anger and like they're goin' to try to do something to you. And they say off stuff like, "oh that's a fag right there" or "that's a man y'all look at that." And it just happens, and you can't... like if you're by yourself... Even though I know I can take care of myself, but in a crowd of people I'm not gonna get bad, you know. They could like gang jump you. It's

embarrassing and humiliating. Then you get scared when you get off your stop cause you don't know if they're gonna get off the bus too.

This woman's fears are particularly concerning and valid, as black trans women report frequent harassment while traveling alone via public transit. The woman stated that when being harassed she wasn't going to "get bad" or in other words confront a crowd of people on a bus by herself, even though she is otherwise confident. The risk is that it could turn into a larger altercation. Black trans women have to be hyper-vigilant and aware of such risks when traveling in their everyday life, and receive verbal harassment without the ability to rebuff such comments. The power that a harasser retains when their comments are received but not rebuffed could manifest in the internalization of harassment, and place added stress on black trans women.

5.1.5 Intra-Community Violence

One of the most complex discussions within this issue is intra-community violence with black trans women. Historically, transgender women of color have been whitewashed out of stories of major events in gender and sexual minority history such as the Stonewall Riots [44]. This theme of erasure or being forgotten as a part of the larger gender and sexual minority community is common, as noted by one participant, *"it's like we're the forgotten piece of the LGBT."* The erasure of black trans women in particular from gender and sexual minority spaces, events, and stories may stem from racial tensions, transphobia, or a combination of the two, and may manifest in many ways. Strong themes that arose with this topic were: being taken advantage of by white gender and sexual minority community leaders, harassment by gay men, racialized harassment in gay bars, House & Ball Community violence, and violence among black transgender women.

5.1.5.1 Community Leadership and Black Trans Women

Being a forgotten member of the broader gender and sexual minority community may take many forms, such as a lack of inclusion and representation of black transgender women in event planning and program development of gender and sexual minority resources. Failing to include black transgender women as stakeholders in the development of resources may render such resources inaccessible due to barriers for black trans women that others are insensitive to. These structural oversights contribute to the cycle of violent oppression that black trans women are locked into. Feelings of systemic marginalization against black trans women were also strong within the groups when it came to local gender and sexual minority organizations. Participants cited difficulties with trusting white leadership in these organizations due to being taken advantage of in the past. One woman described how she felt working with white leaders in local gender and sexual minority groups:

Caucasian people intimidate me cause they have power over me in some sense, over me. To them I was just a dumb tranny off the streets, tryin' to come make a difference, and I felt as though I was taken advantage of. They come to us for ideas so they can take it over and they be the pillar of good. Don't be no fucking pillar of good on my time, after I came down here and out in all this time and talked to you and pulled these girls into your organization and you gonna treat me like that.

What has to be mentioned that this participant brings up is the overabundance of white people in leadership for gender and sexual minority causes. Additionally, some white gender and sexual minority leaders may take up inclusion of gender and sexual minority people of color in a cause, but it may end up looking more like tokenism and fail to compensate or even acknowledge the work of, and people of color, black trans women in this particular case. Her

own sense of distrust for white gender and sexual minority leadership was reflected in the views she heard in her own community, “*Somethin’ I learned within our community, our black community, they don’t support the (local LGBT organization)... It just makes it hard to trust people.*” The perceived distrust of predominately white gender and sexual minority organizations by the black gender and sexual minority community is a reflection of a lack of resources that are socially accessible to black gender and sexual minority people. While Pittsburgh boasts many resources for gender and sexual minority people, the racial and ethnic makeup of their staff are largely white, and few organizations are run specifically by transgender people of color.

5.1.5.2 Gay Bars and Gay Men

Some discussions about gay men referred to white or black gay and bisexual men, while others referred specifically to butch queens, a term used to describe gay and bisexual men within the House and Ball Community. The term butch queen also makes some reference to gender, so for the purposes of this comments about gay men will be differentiated from those made about butch queens.

Tensions between gay men and transgender women are charged with assumptions about sexuality and gender. Some gay men are known to push the boundaries of gender norms, expressing a great deal of comfort with their own expression of femininity. Some gay men may invalidate transgender women’s identity then by assuming that transgender women are not comfortable expressing their femininity as men. Some transgender women also identified as gay men prior to coming out as transgender, and thus have been known in gay circles with a different name and pronouns. This may lead gay men to disregard transgender women’s name and pronoun choices, which can be painful and hurtful. In particular, discussion about gay men began with one woman’s account of a friend’s funeral. Here she described how gay men at a

transgender woman's funeral felt the need to address the deceased woman by her male name, "...she had passed away... and it was a gay memorial. All the gay guys got up; they had to say something. They always said (birth name). Her name's (chosen name), she's been (chosen name) for 17 years." While the intention of such actions is unclear, the impact of actively mis-naming and mis-gendering a transgender person by members of one's supposed community even in death is invalidating of one's lived experiences. Invalidating an intrinsic component of one's being by community members is to enact violence; it reduces the value and worth of transgender people in a community rife with hierarchical power dynamics.

In other ways, community members subtly, but systemically target black transgender women through enacting dress code requirements that specifically restrict dress culturally specific to gender and sexual minority people of color. Participants below referred to bans made at a local gay bar:

It seems like the white gay clubs only like twinks, do you know what I mean? They actually told two of my friends like "oh, you can't wear hats in the club." Now you know black guys, like "bitch my hair's not cut, I'm not goin' out without a hat on." They told them they can't wear hats, and there's white guys with their skullys, baseball caps and hoods on and boots.

I performed at (Bar A) last summer and all of a sudden they came out with this, they issued us, a list of items that we cannot wear.

That's why everyone is always at (Bar B). I've went in there (Bar A) a couple times, and the second time I tried to go in there they like "oh you're banned," I'm like "you don't even know my name to ban me."

Policy to ban certain items of clothing in a gay bar might aim to reduce violence by restricting types of articles of clothing worn by those commonly associated with violence, but inherent in these rules are harmful stereotypes of gender and sexual minority people of color as violent. Gender and sexual minority people of color and in this case black trans women, are disproportionately impacted by these rules when a style of clothing that is culturally specific is banned. Thus, black trans women might find themselves unwelcome in spaces that are supposed to be safe and welcoming, or even banned for unclear reasons as the participant above mentioned. Further contributing to the isolation and negativity that black trans women encounter in supposed welcoming spaces, women in the groups described angry looks and remarks they receive for being in clubs that are predominately occupied by gay men, *“when I used to go to (Bar C), if they didn’t know I was performing, they’d look at me like with daggers. Like, ‘what the fuck you doin’ in our bar? This is OUR bar. Why don’t you go to the straight bar?’”*

Gay men in such spaces may assume that transgender women do not belong in gay spaces, and inherent in that assumption is that all transgender women are straight and thus belong at a straight bar. Not only does that assumption fail to recognize the fluidity of sexuality, but also fails to acknowledge that many transgender women are not safe or even respected in straight spaces, as discussed previously. Black trans women are structurally and socially excluded from spaces and opportunities to forge relationships and community.

5.1.6 House and Ball Community

The House and Ball Community is an important aspect of black culture for many sexual and gender minority people of color as mentioned in the background. For the women in these groups, House and Ball provided both a sense of family and community, but was also a source of

tremendous dispute and violence. Strong themes that emerged in discussions about House and Ball community were: tension and violence with butch queens, pressure to enter illegal trades to gain resources for House and Ball events, and disputes among black transgender women.

5.1.6.1 Butch Queens

Conflicts with butch queens centered on language, standards of femininity, and competition. Put simply, one woman stated, *“I think it’s the butch queens who hates the trannies.”* Conflict between black trans women and butch queens share similarities with some of the tensions between black trans women and gay men as mentioned before. In addition to transgender women being known in circles with butch queens prior to coming out as transgender, there is an unfortunate tendency in advocacy in general to lump butch queens and transgender women together; this is due in part to the similar risk levels for HIV, but may result in the unnecessary conflation that black trans woman’s struggles are the same or similar, and again reduces black trans women to their genitalia. Women described difficulty in conversations with butch queens about language, particularly terms that are known to be offensive to transgender women. One woman described a debate with butch queens about calling transgender women “trannies”:

All the gay boys used to call each other “mary” or “girl” and now it’s like, “oh, that’s a tranny,” “look at the tranny.” And I’m like, “hold up, fuck that.” I posted something on this group and I posted “you all gotta stop with this tranny stuff.” The butch queens, they say, “oh we don’t want to be called butch queens we’re gay boys. So if you all call us butch queens then we oughta be able to call you trannies.” It’s not about your right to call me anything you know, but what you want to call me, it’s about respecting me. If I ask you not to call me something, just don’t say it. I wouldn’t do that to you. If you don’t

want to be called John, I won't call you John when your name is Mac. So why do that to me? And as much as they say as they love us...

In these conversations, butch queens equate their experience of being referred to as such to the use of the slur tranny against black trans women, a unilateral comparison. In this conversation, butch queens do not recognize that the use naming others with identity labels is more than about respecting personal identification; it is about understanding the historical implications of the use of slurs. Tranny is a slur that has been used to enact violence and power over black trans women, and when butch queens use the word it enacts a power dynamic because butch queens and transgender women do not receive the same social benefits. That sentiment also comes across when women in the groups addressed how butch queens judge transgender women for their adherence to acceptable norms of femininity. One woman talked about how butch queens insult transgender women if they don't meet such standards:

They will take you down, for real. How you gonna tell another girl if she's real or not? They feel like that's their place to tell you, "oh bitch, you ain't that real, I think you need to pump up."

In this quote, a woman parrots a butch queen telling a transgender woman to meet realness expectations and "pump up" which likely means she should use silicone injections to enhance a feminine figure. In House and Ball, realness reflects one's ability to mimic sexual and gender norms, and specifically for transgender women it indicates their ability to embody norms of femininity. Butch queens dictating black trans women's realness disempowers black trans women and reasserts a power dynamic within House and Ball communities. Drawing on this same concept, another woman suggested that butch queens are not entitled to judge transgender

women in competition due to their different identities, and that their differences in gender should keep butch queens out of altercations specific to women:

A man who doesn't even like vagina, a man who's not even attracted to women, how can you judge what I look like and I'm not real enough? That's why I don't come out, because these butch queens feel like, just because we still have... But we're women. One girlfriend is fightin' another woman, you jumpin' in a women's fight, you feel me? You are a man still.

This woman affirms the distinct difference between transgender women and butch queens in House and Ball culture. To her, it means that butch queens may not be able to relate womanhood, and thus don't have a right to judge black trans women in competition or meddle in the disputes of black trans women. Conversely, one woman shared an encounter in which her friends who are butch queens supported her in an altercation, suggesting that for some women, the division of genders is not necessary, *"I got my hair tagged, and we started fightin'. Now I had my butch queens with me so they stood between me."* The support of butch queens may be important to some, while for others the distinction is important in affirming one's womanhood. Centric to both of these statements though is a need to be backed by one's community regardless of shared identity, without disempowering black trans women.

5.1.6.2 Competition

House and Ball culture has competitive foundations, however, and in small communities that competition can get heated. Butch queens, whether intentionally or not, assert power dynamics in House and Ball by instigating conflict between black trans women. Participants suggested that butch queens use competition in House and Ball to pit black trans women against one another:

The butch queens try and pit us against each other too. They're like, "oh my god, did you see (name)'s dress?" or "oh my god did you see (name)'s hair?" or "oh my god you should get that." And that plays on your own insecurities cause it's like well, "what's wrong with [me]?"

Being pitted against other transgender women by butch queens in competitions that prize one's presentation of femininity was a detriment to this woman's self-esteem. As discussed in the literature review, the categories for competition in balls themselves simultaneously serve to empower and disenfranchise black trans women. Competitions pitting women against each other over their ability to meet beauty expectations can be internalized and further fuel violence between women. One woman addressed this concern with an event organizer by suggesting that balls offer categories for transgender women that aren't so focused on feminine beauty standards:

I was tellin' him "maybe next time you throw a ball, maybe have some of the old school walks," like they had designer's delight- if you can sew and you make your outfit and you walk the runway with it, or you do a hairstyle. I said, "trans people are talented in other ways than looking like a woman." Cause everything is based on our appearance in the ball room, it's nothing based on our talent. If we can sing, or we can do hair, or we can sew our ass off, they don't cater to that. There's more categories for butch queens. Butch queen this, butch queen that, butch queen this, butch queen that. With trans it's always face, realness, and sex siren and that's it.

The lack of diverse competition categories available to black trans women at balls builds on this growing evidence that others within the community believe the only thing black trans women have to offer is their femininity, and also that they must repeatedly prove their femininity

to others within the community. It was clear through these discussions that pressure to prove one's femininity in House and Ball leads young transgender women to seek financial resources so that they may alter their appearance to fit these standards. This may mean participation in sex work or other illicit trades. This pressure may be heightened due to the fact that House and Ball becomes a substitute family, a community for many young transgender women who have been rejected by their families, and for whom acceptance and validation is hard to come by:

They got these young girls, 16, 17, 18, they ain't got no money and when they get a little \$50 they don't get them some soap, they don't get them some toothpaste, they go get them a wig for the ball room. They go get them some new shoes, I mean that's what they do, they don't wanna save no money. They might get a check from work and they spend that whole check on the effect.

The negative effect it does have on the community is that it puts so much pressure on these kids to do all this shit so fast. I'm talking about thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of things. So then you get into the white collar crimes, or you get into prostitution, because you get this done and this done, and buy this bag, and that shoe, and this wig, and this makeup, and get to this city on this plane, and be in this hotel so you can turn your dates. And it's just for the faggots to clap for you, really? I mean, you've gotta do all this? For what, a plastic trophy and a couple dollars?

And you're name ain't even on it.

I think it puts people in jeopardy for crimes with prostitution and you could just definitely ruin your life being in that scene.

Tryin' to be a cool kid.

Tryin' to be accepted.

Some of the women who spoke in that excerpt participate in Ballroom events, but see the damaging consequences of its competitive nature. For them, the accolades from their peers, acceptance, and trophies aren't worth the risk associated with illicit trade many partake in in order to have the financial means to participate in House and Ball. These women have been in the scene longer though, and have greater insight than young black trans women who are just now finding the scene as a home and a community. For young black trans women, House and Ball may be a valuable tool in building self-confidence and also risk for violence in trades necessary to gain financial means.

5.1.6.3 Black Trans Women

Lastly, violence among black transgender women in House and Ball was a noticeable issue of concern. The limited categories and pitting of one another against each other by others like butch queens may contribute to this intense animosity. Two women describe the degree of intensity as:

It's so extreme it's like they're fighting to kill each other. Not like trannies snatching each other's weaves out in the street everyday but like when it does it happen it's [like]...

They're out to kill you.

Though other issues such as jealousy and fighting over partners came up, most participants linked the animosity among transgender women to competition fostered in House and Ball:

The Ballroom scene is the key to why transgender women fight each other. It is the key to why we fight each other, because they place us in a competition.

I think that's definitely where the competitiveness in the trans community comes forth, because it's already a competitive sport, so it puts you in that competitive

mind like “I have to be the best, when I go to this ball I have to be more fabulous than her.”

Again, like mentioned above, transgender women in House and Ball are fighting one another for titles of realness, basically pass-ability and one’s ability to reflect femininity, “*the root of it is that realness category.*” This competition for realness and femininity cuts across age, and has set a clear divide between younger and older black trans women. Participants in the group were frustrated with young women who came into the scene seeming respectful, but whose use of hormones and relationships with trade⁹ men lessened their respect toward older black trans women:

What gags me about these young girls, some of these girls that I’ve seen them been around, they feel like, “oh I’m mother, I’m ‘monin¹⁰, I got this trade¹¹.” Bitch, you know that the trade you’re fucking is the trade we had before, honey. You’re only the new girls that come around, baby.

The unfortunate consequence in this age divide between younger and older black trans women is the lack of mentorship and solidarity among black trans women that could act as a buffer and source of support. Another woman in this discussion noted that such tension was a form of violence in itself, and called upon women in the group to recognize it and their ability to act as role models to younger black trans women, discussed later in this paper:

This is how I look at, as far as the LGBT, when it comes to us black people, I think we all hate each other and y’all were just prime example of that. I don’t feel that way as far as

⁹ Trade are men who may have sex with men and transgender women, and are perceived to have sex with cisgender women, but who do not identify as gay or bisexual

¹⁰ The participant here is referring to someone’s use of hormones for transition.

¹¹ The participant describes how a young girl flaunts that she’s got this ‘trade’ aka a straight man who has sex with transgender women.

hating the young girls and the young girls hating the older girls, that's a term of violence in a sense.

As is depicted in other areas of this paper, there are many sources of violence in the lives of black trans women, many of which come from places that should be supportive: family, intimate partners, law enforcement, gender and sexual minority community members, House and Ball community, and so on. Most of these violent dynamics reflect a power dynamic in which one party feels the need to assert itself over the other. In a bullying mentality, it makes sense that a person who has been made to feel inferior by another would want to assert their dominance in other available positions. Where there are few venues for black trans women to do so, age becomes a place where superiority can be reflected, and as this participant pointed out, that power differential contributes to violence between black trans women. Thus, vital communities where one might hope to find a sense of belonging become sites of violence. Like one participant previously suggested in regard to family, it may be easier to take such violence and conflict from an outside community, but when it comes from within a community that is supposed to reflect kinship the impact may be worse.

5.1.7 Black Trans Women and Social Media

In addition to intra-community violence that arose in House and Ball community, participants raised their own concerns about violence they had seen documented through social media, and violence that might be incited as a result of social media activities. Women discussed a couple of instances of violence documented through social media that didn't pertain to transgender women. They generally expressed fear after seeing such videos or photos that bystanders at an actual violent incident would just post photos or videos online and would not intervene. Another issue

was arose was that how social media presence can incite violence. In particular, a local black trans woman was mentioned who was known for outing local men by posting explicit videos of them having sex with her. Participants described the possible violence this may bring to the woman herself, as well as other black trans women.

(name)'s been clockin'¹² a lot of boys, she's still postin'.

The boys that I deal with starting hitting me up like "please don't expose me please don't expose me."(Name) is fucking it up for transgender women, because these men are not going to want to deal with us because they are going to be afraid that they are going to be exposed.

They gonna kill her.

She gonna bring violence to us.

All of us.

Cause they are gonna start huntin' trannies.

These videos are shared by locals hungry for conflict on the Internet, and straight men with girlfriends or wives are outed in their communities. Straight men's affairs with a black trans women are thus sensationalized as perverse by a black trans woman herself. The use of social media to out men having relationships with transgender women dangerously reinforces several transphobic and homophobic notions discussed in previous sections- first that there is shame to be had for men who have sex with transgender women, and inherent in that shame is the repeated homophobic reduction of transgender women to their genitalia. In the case of black trans women, a dangerous stereotype continues to be perpetuated. These women realistically fear for their lives

¹² In this instance 'clocking' means that that this woman is outing men for their sexual relations with a transgender woman.

as a result of the postings of these videos because as previously discussed at length, men are known to and have sought to assault and murder black trans women.

5.1.8 Institutional Violence

Relationships between transgender people and legal systems are often contentious due to both systematic forms of violence such as the viable ‘panic defense’ mentioned previously, and actual physical violence enacted by police against transgender people [2]. Racial tensions with police also complicate what it means to interact with law enforcement as a black transgender women. Though it may be unclear in specific instances whether police enact violence against black transgender women for their race, sex, gender identity, or any combination of the three, it is clear that the combination of those three factors puts individuals at high risk to experience violence from law enforcement.

5.1.8.1 Law Enforcement

Illustrating the complete lack of distrust for police, one woman stated, “*Honestly am petrified of police.*” Upon further exploration, this woman expanded on her fear of police given her own experiences witnessing police use excessive force against black transgender women and profiling her for sex work:

I’ve witnessed like, like I literally eye witnessed an account of like a police officer overstepping his bounds and it was like an accusation of prostitution towards a friend of mine and it wasn’t the case.

Facilitator: They arrested her based on prior [warrant]s?

Yeah but they did, they definitely did harass me too. They were handcuffing her and putting her up against the car they're like boom, like she hit her face off the window, they tossed her in the back of the car. I said "I know my rights, you're not goin' to harass me," and so they were like "okay, well we need to write your name and if you have prostitution on your record then you're goin' to jail too."

In the other focus group, another participant drew the same connection, of cops targeting black transgender women in an area known for sex work, asking other women in the group if they have noticed such behavior. She also notes the power that a cop asserts when he mis-genders a trans woman:

Do you feel like transgender women is always processed [e.g., arrested] uptown? Cause cops are disrespectful. If you clearly look the part, don't keep calling somebody Sir. I've witnessed that with my own two eyes, I did. And this girl was un-spookable and he kept calling her, "Sir," and that pissed me off and because he was a cop. You know my mouth, I wasn't trying to go back to jail, I'm scared of jail, that's not for me, but don't keep disrespecting us.

The woman that she observed in an interaction with police was 'un-spookable' or unflappable despite the experience of being mis-gendered by someone who held power over her as an agent of the law. To have one's gender mocked by police is a humiliating experience that could be used to make someone feel inferior to the officer. Such a power play is not only disrespectful as described by the participant, but also subjugates the person being questioned to an inferior position. The power dynamic is also present here as the participant notes her own fear

of addressing the officer for mis-gendering the woman; she feared his ability to arrest her and send her to prison on false charges, thus she could not safely speak up and advocate for this woman.

In another woman's own experience, a power dynamic was used to enact sexual violence which invalidates a woman's identity. This participant reported feeling sexually violated during an unnecessary search. She described a female officer going up under her bra during a search and while referring to her bra asking, "*is this for bustier-ness? Like on the streets, like [they] go up underneath into your bra? Isn't that weird? I felt very violated when that happened to me.*" Whether or not the search method was valid or necessary, the officer used her position of power to embarrass the woman and draw attention to her body. These power plays no doubt make asserting one's innocence difficult. Projecting difference in power makes it easier for an officer to assign blame or responsibility on a party, and socially our society is quick to reinforce this notion especially of black people who are typecast as thugs and criminals. Most disturbingly, law enforcement also blame victims of abuse such as described by this participant:

Once I got older my father and I would start fist fighting cause I wasn't goin' to take him choking me and all this kind of stuff... I called the police on him and I brought the police officer to my dad's house and I said, "this man choked me" and you could see the fingerprints on my throat you know, and he said "if you called me a motherfucker I'd have choked the shit out of you too." And the police officer just walked off.

Tiring of her father's abuse for her perceived gayness, this woman contacted the one source she thought could help; the police. As a child, she was dismissed by the officer who blamed her for inciting the violence by swearing. Suggesting that a child who transgresses gender and sexuality norms is deserving of violence for swearing is akin to the stereotyping as

criminals that black trans women may experience as an adult. In the case of this woman during her childhood, she was a black child that behaved outside of accepted gender norms- a crime against social standards. Thus her meager act of swearing was deserving of violence in the eyes of the officer. One woman cited the difficulty that such stereotypes present when she might actually need to contact the police:

First of all I'm a transgender hoe, so if I call the police they're gonna look at me like I tried to rob this white man and I tried to steal his money, so there's no reason for me to try to call the police. Imma just pack my stuff on and move on to the next city, and that's what I kept doing.

As a black transgender woman who does sex work, the cards are stacked against her ability to take legal action in crimes committed against her. The disturbing reality of police treatment of black trans women is crystallized in their fears and distrust of the police, even in times of major trauma. As mentioned previously, this woman discusses the implications that being a sex worker has on her ability to be taken seriously by law enforcement:

I have been raped, I have been beat up and robbed, I've had a gun put in my face, I've been maced, I've had everything done to me, that violence, and I didn't even report it. I dealt with it and moved on to the next city, and it is very deadly within the sex industry, because I looked on myself as a hoe, ain't no cop going to believe me if I call.

Despite the grievous bodily and emotional harm this woman experienced, her credibility as a witness to her own crimes was erased by her multiply stigmatized identities as a black transgender woman who does sex work. This is what these women are up against. The demonization of black transgender women by law enforcement further enables violence at the hands of just about anyone that can get their hands on them.

Upon discussing the severity of experiences with police, some participants suggested a need for sensitivity or cultural competency training of police officers locally regarding the interactions with black transgender women. One participant felt that this was necessary, but doubtful of the potential impact given her perceptions of police culture in Pittsburgh:

I also think as long as these same people are patrolling it's not gonna be so much of a change because they don't take stuff very serious here, because Pittsburgh's a real old boy-sie type place. They're cousins, and they're uncles, and they're dads... and I go to some of the police officers events, I see them all together, we all hang out together. A lot of my family friends are cops. I don't have a problem with the cops, it's just I could only imagine like, "you believe these fuckin' faggots? Tryin' to tell us how to do our fuckin' job, are you fuckin' serious?" They don't take things serious here. Other cities, there are gay cops on their police force, so you know groups of them that are actually like... There are actually gay service people.

This participant makes a valuable observation that Pittsburgh Police Department has not been known to do any work around gender and sexual minority issues, whether that be in training or through the intentional hiring of gender and sexual minority officers as liaisons to gender and sexual minority communities. She also suggests that the family-like nature of the PPD fosters a hostile environment that would not welcome suggestions of change. This may carry over into Pittsburgh police officers having homogenous, harmful stereotypes of black trans women, which could be a unique contributing factor to black trans woman's experience of violence in Allegheny County.

5.1.8.2 Jail and Prison

Jails or prisons are commonly known within transgender communities as particularly unsafe for transgender women. As discussed in previous sections, those in power can use their position to demean, invalidate, or subjugate black transgender women. It is unsurprising then, that most of the negative encounters participants discussed were with prison personnel rather than other inmates. Having been in jail herself, this woman first spoke to the sexual attention drawn to black trans women in jail or prison by prison personnel:

Now the biggest problem we have is when the trans girls go to jail. When you in the hole, all these C[orrectional] O[fficer]s they come and when you first get booked and you're down in the holding cell all these people comin' to see and lookin' through the window, especially if you got breasts and hips.

This participant also shared how prison personnel address black trans women who are inmates by their given names, providing evidence of a degrading power dynamic through active mis-naming of black trans women, *“they love calling you by your boy's name. Your bracelet says one thing they won't call you by your girl name, 'c'mere Hank , c'mere Harry let's go.”*

In addition to verbally degrading black trans women inmates by mis-naming them, participants described prison personnel using excessive force, *“when they search you they get really violent too, grabbing you, carryin' on, breaking your shit.”*

A surprising revelation from one of the focus groups was tension that exists when black trans women are housed with women, rather than men. Advocacy efforts around improving conditions for black trans women in prison push for black trans women to be housed with cisgender women. This is in part as respect to one's gender identity, and also due to stories of sexual assault by men that black trans women experience in prison. Regarding this tension, one

woman shared that she preferred to be housed with the men for her ability to use her feminine sexuality to gain protection:

They always throw me in the female and I'm like "no! I've gotta be with the men still!"

Facilitator: So why do you choose to be with the men even, given that option?

Cause I'm a pretty girl and they like pretty girls. I don't have no problem, I find the biggest, baddest one in there and it's just the women, they're vicious. They don't want you in there around them, they say "no, no, that's a man, that's a dude, he's got a dick." But you do what you gotta do, I mean, you've gotta survive, it's all about survival and even out here it's about survival.

This particular woman felt confident in her ability to navigate being housed with male inmates and utilizing her sexuality to do so. Her preference to be housed with men was a survival mechanism, and using her sexuality was a tool she could wield to gain protection.

Unique to black transgender women is the unparalleled risk for violence they face when they are also HIV positive in prison. This woman discussed the danger of being an HIV positive transgender woman when housed with other women:

In jail I had to be cool with shit about the medication, and the nurse. One time (name) got spooked¹³ in jail cause this bitch didn't like her, and started goin' around and saying that she had the hot shit¹⁴, that's what they call it in prison. They tried to get to her, and she went into protected custody. So you know that's dangerous.

Citing an acquaintance's experience with being targeted for being an HIV positive transgender woman in prison and subsequent need for additional protection highlights the added

¹³ To be 'spooked' is to be scared, startled, or put-off by something.

¹⁴ Having the 'hot shit' is referring to being HIV positive.

stigma of being HIV positive in an already dangerous environment for black trans women. As black trans women are at high risk for HIV [6], this added stigma adds to the oppressive burden that black trans women may experience for having multiply marginalized identities. Black trans women are experiencing violence in jail/prison as a result of their identities in very obvious ways such as through active mis-gendering and mis-naming, to more complex ways such as in conflict with women over partners or for being further stigmatized by HIV status.

5.1.9 Protective Factors

With the potential for violence in so many facets of black trans woman's everyday lives, women in the groups have developed skills to evade or confront the risks. Strategies ranged from evasive tactics such as alertness, avoidance and ignoring to more proactive measures such as educating, or reactive measures like retaliation. Some measures are not without their own consequences though, and may even be indicators of mental health conditions caused by trauma.

5.1.9.1 Hypervigilance

With the possibility of violence in so many different social spheres, being alert and always prepared to respond to a situation is a necessary tool to survival. Women agreed that this is instrumental, "*Being transgender you always have to keep your guard up,*" and that really they don't have a choice in the matter if they want to survive:

Facilitator: How do you pick your battles? How do you know when it's the right time to fight for you know, what you feel like you need to fight for and when you just need to back off?

Umm-

You don't.

You don't.

You wake up and put your face and makeup on and do your hair and put your clothes on and you don't have a choice, they're gonna be botherin' with you... If you walk around and you're just docile and like "oh gosh, I'm just a tranny and everybody knows it," they'll play on that.

I'm always on standby, I'm just being honest; I'm always in fight or flight.

You always keep your guard, you always have to be safe.

Awareness of daily risk is key as many women responded that they don't have the luxury to pick and choose their battles. Hypervigilance is key to survival, and as one participant asserts, part of an alert defense is not carrying oneself as docile and vulnerable, rather it is more productive to keep one's guard up to not appear weak. Hypervigilance could also be a sign of post-traumatic stress disorder given the amount of trauma these women have experienced [45].

5.1.9.2 Avoidance

Part of being alert and protecting oneself for these women means knowing where danger lies. Many women expressed the need to avoid particular areas or situations in order to protect themselves from violence. Sometimes this meant going out of one's way to avoid a neighborhood, finding friends with cars, keeping headphones in, keeping a private life, or avoiding relationships all together:

I just put earphones in.

A lot of people say I look very unapproachable when I'm out and about goin' places, but that's because when I come through downtown it's tunnel vision; it's where I'm goin' and I'm not paying attention to anything else.

You never know who the fuck is calling your phone. You know, calling "meet me here, come here," and I'm like "alright, sure," or they know where you live, and they're like, "are you at home?" "Yeah I'm home." Okay, "pop pop pop pop pop" (mimicking gunshots.) I don't want any bad blood with nobody. I keep to myself, it's me and my little gay friends and that's that.

As previously quoted in reference to intimate partners, this participant cites her avoidance of certain men for relationships:

That's why I typically try to stay away from down low boys because it's like, if they kill me, and it's like I've never been around their family, they've never met mine, or my friends, it's easy [for him] to say, "well I know he tried to trick me."

In the context of sex work, protection through group solidarity was important in avoiding violent clients and the police. Women kept tabs on each other and alerted one another when police came around:

In my day it was all the girls, we would all look out for each other, we'd be like "(name)'s coming, girl," and you'd hear a click click click in the alley, and we'd jump in the dumpster or whatever it was.

As an alternative to outing oneself to clients upon meeting, one woman suggested having explicit conversations with her clients prior to meeting as a method of avoiding dangerous men.

Well, there's other ways to do it besides saying that, because a lot of times you know they'll be like, "oh what do you like to do?" No, what do you like to do, fuck what I like to do sweetheart.

Avoidance can also sometimes literally mean isolating oneself from one's communities, *"I handle violence, I just disappear, like I'm not gonna lie to you, cause I'm tired of fightin."*

These avoidance strategies range from direct to indirect, like keeping ear phones in or staying out of areas where one might be harassed to avoidance of certain social dynamics or relationships. This valuable defense mechanism is not without consequence and likely contributes to the isolation of black trans women; as one participant put it, she *"disappears"* in order to avoid violence. To disappear suggests that there is nowhere safe to be but far away from others, which is also suggestive of the impact of violent trauma on one's mental health [45].

5.1.9.3 Ignoring

When avoidance fails as a violence prevention strategy and a potentially violent situation arises, some women rely on their personal strength and resilience to outwardly ignore painful and humiliating experiences. This may mean not addressing slurs thrown at oneself at the bus stop, or choosing not to engage in community conflicts:

Sometimes I stop, then I gather myself and I just keep goin', because it's not worth it. You have to remember you're gonna cuss her out, and then she's gonna get her big brother, and then you're gonna bring someone, and then he's gonna come back with all his friends, and then you gotta come with all your family, and it's just never gonna stop. It's just like violence begets violence begets violence, and it's spicy.

Recognizing that violent conflicts are often not a one-time occurrence is key to this participant's ability to ignoring conflict. For another, her resilience in hearing slurs and humor

allow her to rebuff verbal harassment, *“I can take the verbal, I can take all you can say anything you want to me, I will laugh in your face.”* Such a skill is not available to everyone and often takes time to develop, if ever. Personal growth may be key to this ability. For one, the ability to walk away from these situations was a sign of growth and maturity as a woman:

My mom told me when I was younger, “you getting too old to be actin’ like you have no sense, that was you when you were a kid, grow up, you don’t have to put your hands on people to realize something. What you do is show you can do better.” That’s what made me get myself together, build myself as a woman, build my confidence and everything about me. You don’t have to get into conflicts with nobody. If you’re doing what your doin’, that means you can just walk away, girl bye. I’m not gonna put my life or my time on the line, I’m not goin’ to jail for that.

When the emotional energy is available, ignoring is a valuable tool in evading violence. Unfortunately, this is a skill that may take time to develop, as the impact of harassment and violence is understandably profound. Even when one manages to contain a visible reaction, ignored slurs and harassment may be internalized. While some may be able to take insults in stride, the impact of an unaddressed attack could leave one feeling like the harasser still has power.

5.1.9.4 Educating

Some saw themselves as educators about transgender women and transgender issues, and that their role as educators would help prevent violence for themselves and others. In response to being asked how black trans women handle violence, one participant described using education to empower herself and feel like she is making a difference:

How I handle it nowadays, I strive to make a difference, that's what I'm doing, if someone has an issue with transgender people I will educate them until their ears about to jump off and walk away and I will tell them everything about being transgender, and how empowering, and how we're different, and how were making a difference in the world, and I push that agenda.

Most of the time these conversations had to do with potential partners, though some felt that providing the education could be just as dangerous by hurting the ego of a straight man or causing him to question his sexuality. Educating was also an important tool in developing one's own sense of self and ability to handle violent situations.

5.1.9.5 Self-Defense and Retaliation

At the end of the day, black trans women face a seemingly insurmountable quantity of violence, and it is no surprise when self-defense and retaliation occurs. In some cases, it even acts as protective factor; asserting one's presence might make a potential aggravator think twice before acting. In other instances, it is a means of entertaining and humoring oneself in trying situations. Some women found it absolutely vital to their survival to act in self-defense, like this woman who previously described defending herself against her father's abuse, "*once I got older my father and I would start fist fighting cause I wasn't goin' to take him choking me.*" Other women keep a quick wit about them, and call out aggravators making slurs on the street who otherwise expect their verbal slurs to be heard but not addressed:

The other day when I was getting off the bus somebody clocked me and was like "that's a man." I turned around and was like "excuse me?" He looks at me like I was wild was just like "oh just keep it moving" and I was just like, "no, if you wanted my attention you have it."

Even when serious threats of violence arise from these verbal slurs, some women do not back down and call them as they see them. After calling out someone on the street for calling her a man, this woman addressed a man who threatened her, saying he had a gun.

“...I got a gun in my pocket, I got a gun in my pants and I’m not afraid to use it.” I chopped him real quick, I was like “you don’t got a gun on you but it’s just due to the fact that you got the nerve to be sagging all the way down to your knees with some briefs on, where’s the gun at?”

When addressed with verbal assaults, women claim retaliation as pride in themselves, their bodies and identities, *“I’m proud of who I am, I love my body, I love everything about me. So I will not let somebody downgrade who the fuck I am.”* Other times, retaliation comes from a place of serious anger and hurt, often being triggered by insidious slurs such as faggot:

It’s a trigger.

That word used to singe the soul.

For me it used to set fire to my rain, and when it set fire to my rain I’m ready to set fire to somebody’s ass.

But even when many of these women are angry, they have personal standards for retaliation. For example, women said they would not fight back unless someone entered their personal space, like within arm’s reach, or someone put their hands upon them:

I have a code. If we’re in a heated debate, just stay out of arms reach because if you come within this distance while we’re in a heated argument I’m automatically like okay “You wanna fight?” I’m not gonna wait for you to attack me, I’m just gonna swing and it’s because you came within my personal space. I’ll warn you like okay you need to back up, that’s your only warning though. I have to bite you because I felt threatened.

Lastly, but importantly, weapons are an important line of defense for black trans women, many of who expressed great fear for their livelihood:

I carry weapons around, y'all know me.

Because it's not safe out here. We ran into that before, when them boys tried to kill us. Nowadays I'm gonna get me a gun, cause if you run up on me I'm shooting you, because men are killing us for no reason.

Referring to the known murders of transgender women of color around the nation, the use of weapons in retaliation and defense is a valid survival mechanism for this woman. Retaliatory tactics serve multiple purposes for black trans women, including as a proactive measure to assert one's dominance, as a tool to respond to triggering words, and a crucial method for survival in light of the danger that black trans women face.

5.1.10 Solidarity Among Black Transgender Women

A source of strength to handle violence and its damaging effects is solidarity among black transgender women. Some women referenced members of their gay chosen families, members of one's gender and sexual minority community who take up family social roles in the absence of support from birth families, as a source of support in tough times, while others longed for this sense of community:

Y'all had gay mothers, and I was really kinda the solo one, the loner. I didn't have a gay mom a gay dad, I didn't have none of that shit, I had to find my own way. I wished I had a fuckin' gay mom, I used to wish I had a gay dad, but I didn't, I had to find my own way.

Recognizing the toll of isolation on this woman, other women in the group called out what they felt like transgender women should be for each other: support systems and mentors to the younger women. This raised issues for younger women who were fearful of be-friending

other transgender women, and frustrations for those who were trying to help younger transgender women get onto a better path in life:

I think all transgender women should get together, cause we standin' in this alone. The community should be a family. Collectively transgender women, we can help each other a lot.

I tried with the other trans girls, but the thing is, my thing is that I'm afraid.

Don't be afraid to bond with no transgender woman.

It's scary.

What we gotta say or do as older transgender women, is teach them, I know they're a mess, but they're kids, we were all kids.

Trust me I tried, they don't listen. They think they know everything.

You can only grab a few horses at a time and take them to the water, you don't gotta grab all of them. But they are intimidated by us because we are older, we are deeper in transition, we have boobs, we have ass, we have what they want to have so they're intimidated. If the young girls don't have no positive guidance then they ain't never gonna grow up. They want it, we wanted it when we was younger but we didn't wanna accept it from nobody else who was in a different situation than we were in.

This conversation highlights several challenges to building community among black trans women, particularly between younger and older women. One younger participant cited her desire to befriend women but expressed fear because of intimidation. Interestingly, older women in the group described frustrations with young women who are not receptive to their mentorship. For

one woman, it was an act of self-preservation to be a mentor only to two women. Clearly, the issues that black trans women face permeate their ability to build strong bonds in the face of oppression, by no fault of their own. Locally, black trans women may benefit from community resources that support socially safe spaces for black trans women where they can foster solidarity, much like the focus group did for some of these women.

5.1.11 Health Outcomes- Mental Health

Without a doubt, the violence these women have described has an impact on mental health and well-being. In addition, some of the strategies used to protect themselves, such as hypervigilance and avoidance, may be indicators of post-traumatic stress disorder [45], and can have unintended negative consequences like feelings of isolation and loneliness. The collective impact of violence and downstream effects of survival mechanisms such as isolating oneself can also have serious detrimental effects on a person's mental health from anxiety and depression to suicidality. One participant cited her own recent suicide attempt, and relating this to micro-aggressions, emphasized that even playful insults among friends could push someone on the verge of suicide over the edge:

Something that I've learned is you never know if somebody is on their last string. They can be in a group of people and everyone's reading¹⁵ and joking with each another, and you say something insulting to that girl. It could really be her last moment, where she has been contemplating suicide, and that last word to her could have been that point that really pushed her over. That something that's big with me cause this this year I attempted suicide.

¹⁵ "Reading" is a term used in House and Ball and drag culture to describe jokes made usually at someone's expense.

Relating her own experience with mental health to the challenges of being supported by peers, this participant highlights how even subtle micro-aggressions can make someone who is already vulnerable feel further isolated and possibly push them over the edge to suicide. With participants citing tendencies in black communities to avoid discussions of mental health, it may be especially difficult for black trans women to advocate for themselves in a group of friends making hurtful jokes, or to even reach out for help. A lack of support or awareness in one's community of mental health needs adds to the already overly burdensome toll of violence that black trans women face.

6.0 DISCUSSION

These discussions sought to elicit a local characterization of: the context in which black trans women experience violence, preventive factors, service utilization as a result of violence, and impacted health outcomes. When the word violence was mentioned in each discussion group, there was no shortage of conversation. Both personal experiences, and experiences of friends and acquaintances were shared and contextualized violence and risk factors occurring in the spheres of family, sex work, intimate partners, police, jail and prison, general community, and within the gender and sexual minority community. Though enacted in a variety of ways, stigma underlies the many forms of violence these women experience, from subtle micro-aggressions, misgendering and mis-naming, to brutal physical altercations and systemic marginalization. Black transgender women in Allegheny County face painful rejection, humiliation, and invalidation of their identities, and thus their entire being.

Black trans women navigate interwoven violent oppression as the stigma of blackness, transgender femininity, and low socioeconomic status due to racial disparities, and family disownment collide. Race also negatively impacted experiences with law enforcement, local gender and sexual minority organizations, and gay bars or clubs. The stigmas of being a sex worker and/or being HIV positive are added burdens for some black transgender women. In short, the shared experiences of these women reflect how violence becomes a systemic, cyclical experience for black trans women.

Methods for dealing with violence were plentiful in these groups but did not include reporting or disclosure, in fact many avoided doing so out of fear for repercussions and that they would not be taken seriously. Individual level protective factors ranged from hyper-vigilance and avoidance to educating others about transgender issues and retaliation. Even so, many of these protective factors against violence were not without their disadvantages. Some, like avoiding and ignoring, were isolating tactics that left participants feeling lonely, and while self- defense and retaliation are valuable tools in asserting dominance, it never guarantees safety. The risk for violence during retaliation and feelings of isolation add to the existing strain violence has on mental and physical health. Participants drew direct connections to the impact of violence onto feelings of suicidality, and some protective factors like hyper-vigilance and avoidance could actually be signs of post-traumatic stress disorder [45].

Additionally, the objective to determine how black trans women are utilizing support services as a result of violence was not met. The lack of conversation that arose around the topic may be more telling than anything, that there is some sort of barrier to accessing care after violence whether that be emergency housing, restraining orders/law enforcement support, counseling, or case management services. While these are important tools for the immediate survival of black trans women, they alone will not sustain black trans women. These tactics are, after all, just a Band-Aid on a massive wound. No amount of individual resilience and intervention can combat the total effects of systemic violence, and nor should black trans women be responsible for dismantling the systems of violence perpetuated against them.

These results do, however, support that the types of violence against transgender people and transgender women of color documented in other studies regionally and nationally are occurring locally for black trans women in Allegheny County. Change is necessary at a broader

level in our nation in order to decrease violence against black trans women, but such evidence can also be used to support change locally. The discussions yielded powerful details that would be instrumental in navigating local interventions aimed at decreasing violence, such as understanding tensions with local police and white gender and sexual minority leaders, among others. Interventions to decrease stigma and subsequent violence against black trans women in Allegheny County, supported by this evidence, can serve as an example for other communities or even at a broader, societal level.

7.0 CONCLUSION

At the end of the last focus group, women were sharing their collective fears and thoughts about systemic violence against black transgender women. One woman jokingly likened conditions for black trans women in the United States to those in the recent film *The Purge*, a horror film which depicts a twelve hour period of time when all crime is legal, and medical and law enforcement are unavailable. Though the analogy began in jest, the comparison turned painfully dark, and symbolizes the pervasiveness of violence against black transgender women, highlighting the need for immediate action, “*transgender women, we are already in a purge. That wouldn’t be new to us, we would just be tryin’ to survive a bit harder. We already been purged.*”

There is clearly a need for interventions to ameliorate conditions for black trans women particularly in the area of violence. Public health practitioners might look at data such as these and see the correlates like homelessness, HIV status, and sex work as points for intervention. Interventions aimed at these downstream outcomes would be useful in improving health for black trans women, but the violence these women experience will not cease until the upstream risk factors, the stigma underlying violence against black trans women is reduced or eliminated.

In order to make a lasting impact on the health of black transgender women, interventions should aim to reduce stigma and be conducted at a structural level where violence has been demonstrated to be an issue, such as with law enforcement. Locally, this may look like adjusting policy, adding gender and sexual minority liaisons, or tailored trainings for law enforcement

personnel. As noted by a participant though, such interventions may not be received well if they come from outside the community of law enforcement. It would serve these interventions well if allies are identified in law enforcement, and any programs should be developed and implemented collaboratively. If done, such methods may improve buy-in from law enforcement and increase the success of an intervention. Such an intervention could foster law enforcement's intolerance of violence against black trans women, thus leading to: decreased incidences of violence against black trans women by law enforcement, proper documenting of hate crimes, and improved support for victims of violence. black trans women could call upon law enforcement in times of need and receive proper recourse for crimes against them. Such a systemic change in one social sphere can also contribute to shifting norms around gender in other social spheres where black trans women are known to face violence like with families and intimate partners. If we begin this change, we may possibly put an end to the 'purging' of black transgender women from society.

Feasible steps to begin this change locally are listed below:

- 1) Continue focus groups and discussions with black trans women in Allegheny County about violence to richen the existing evidence.
- 2) Expansion of focus groups and discussions to transgender women of color of different races and ethnicities to enhance knowledge of local issues facing transgender women of color.
- 3) Report back of results to interested focus group participants to verify accuracy of interpretation and discuss next steps.
- 4) Dissemination of results to local organizations and leaders serving gender and sexual minorities.

- 5) Collaborative discussions and planning of action steps fronted by transgender women of color and supported by local leaders and organizations interested in improving conditions for and uplifting transgender women of color.

8.0 LIMITATIONS

This study is largely limited in its ability to recruit a sample that is not randomized. Participants were drawn from a local organization known to serve black transgender women, therefore those women's experiences of violence, or willingness to talk about violence might differ from those who do not receive services from the organization. The demographic captured may also not reflect that of the actual population of black transgender women in Allegheny County, which is currently unknown. Focus groups were also co-facilitated by white transgender and cisgender masculine people, which may or may not have affected individuals willingness to participate in the group or the stories shared.

However, these limitations are balanced by the strengths of the study. Participants were incentivized for their participation, likely reducing reporting bias by gaining participants who may have been unlikely to attend. Groups were also conducted at a location accessible, safe, and known to black trans women in the area, promoting a willingness to share and be open. In the second group, a previous participant was also invited back to co-facilitate which further fostered an open dialogue. Furthermore, the final publication of this study will not be released without first inviting all the participants back to review the results. Participants will be compensated for their time, and will be asked for input regarding the interpretation of the results and future actions. Such actions re-affirm the voices of the women uplifted in this paper, and ultimately

gives the community tools and power to address the issue where research has not allowed them to do so in the past.

APPENDIX A- IRB EXEMPT LETTER



University of Pittsburgh *Institutional Review Board*

3500 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 383-1480
(412) 383-1508 (fax)
<http://www.irb.pitt.edu>

Memorandum

To: Mackey Friedman
From: Christopher Ryan PhD, Vice Chair
Date: 10/25/2013
IRB#: [PRO13100323](#)
Subject: Violence and HIV risk in young adult Black LGBT communities

The above-referenced project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board. Based on the information provided, this project meets all the necessary criteria for an exemption, and is hereby designated as "exempt" under section 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2)

Please note the following information:

- If any modifications are made to this project, use the "**Send Comments to IRB Staff**" process from the project workspace to request a review to ensure it continues to meet the exempt category.
- Upon completion of your project, be sure to finalize the project by submitting a "**Study Completed**" report from the project workspace.

Please be advised that your research study may be audited periodically by the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office.

APPENDIX B- INTRODUCTORY SCRIPT

The purpose of this research study is to determine the extent of violence in African American LGBT communities and its perceived relation to HIV risk. For that reason, we will be surveying African American LGBT community members between 18-35 years old and asking them to take part in a focus group that will last approximately 2 hours. If you are willing to participate, our focus group will ask about violence in African American communities-at-large; violence in African American LGBT communities specifically; and how violence might increase HIV risk behavior. A short questionnaire will ask about demographics (e.g., age, race, and gender). There are no major foreseeable risks associated with this project; however, participants may experience feelings of sadness, anger, fear, and anxiety as they discuss community violence. A mental health counselor will be available via referral to help participants process these emotions. Each participant will receive a \$20 cash as a token of our appreciation. Participants who don't stay for the entire focus group will receive a \$10.00 cash. This is an entirely anonymous focus group: your responses will not be identifiable in any way. University of Pittsburgh staff will audiotape the focus group and transcribe the recording without using names, whereupon the audiotapes will be destroyed. Your participation is voluntary, and you may leave the focus group at any time. This study is being conducted by Mackey R. Friedman, PhD, MPH, who can be reached at 412-383-2622, to answer any questions.

APPENDIX C- FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

We're interested in understanding the role that violence plays in your life, and how that might related to health and wellness. We are defining violence as actions of individual(s) that hurt someone, whether that be emotionally or physically. Do you think that this is important?

- 1) What kind of violence do African American transgender women in Pittsburgh experience and how might they protect themselves in these situations?
 - a. Probe: family violence
 - b. Probe: violence in the House and Ball Community (between houses)
 - c. Probe: violence in sex work
 - d. Probe: partner violence
 - e. Probe: white LGBT community violence on black transgender women
 - f. Probe: anti-trans violence within African American community-at-large
 - g. Probe: violence in the community-at-large
 - h. Probe: Retaliation
- 2) How do people in your community deal with this violence?
 - a. Probe: avoiding violent situations
 - b. Probe: retaliation
 - c. Probe: uptake of counseling, anger management, meditation
- 3) Optional (depending on time and discussion trends): How can a program help support the community in periods when violence occurs?
 - a. Probe: Who do folks turn to when they endure or witness violence?
 - i. Police? Friends? House mothers and fathers?
 - ii. Probe: how or when does violence get talked about in the community; how does violence get ignored?

4. What is your **sexual identity**?

a gay b straight c bisexual d lesbian e not sure at this point

5. What is your **race/ethnicity**? (Check **ALL** that apply.)

a White/Caucasian/European American d Asian American/Pacific Islander

b Black/African American e Native American

c Latino/Latina/Hispanic f Mixed Race

g Other: _____

6. What is your **annual income before taxes**?

a Less than \$10,000

b \$10,000-\$19,999

c \$20,000-\$29,999

d \$30,000-\$39,999

e More than \$40,000

6. What is the **last grade of school** you completed?

a 11th grade or less

b 12th grade (obtained a high school diploma or GED)

c Some college, but no degree

d College or related degree (B.A., cosmetology degree, or vocational degree)

e Graduate school (Masters degree or more)

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