

Racism, Violence and Health Project

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Racism makes you sick - It's a deadly disease

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**Report on the Black Community Forum
Racism, Violence, and Health Project
Held November 2002
Halifax, Nova Scotia**

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Note:

During the Black Community Forum held in Halifax in November, 2002, participants' gathered in Talking Circles to discuss how racism affected the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities. They knew beforehand that what they were saying might be written down by volunteers who recorded both themes and direct quotes.

Participants knew they had the right to say "I do not want to be recorded" before or after they spoke. Participants also completed extensive evaluations toward the end of the day. These evaluations included the question "What do you think are the most important issues affecting the health and well-being of the African Nova Scotian community?" The evaluations indicated the age and sex of the participant.

In the report that follows, anything in quotation marks is taken without change directly from the recordings of the Talking Circles (where it would appear as a direct quote) or from the evaluations.

Members of the Reference Group of the Racism, Violence, and Health Project read a draft of the report before it was duplicated. Among other things, they were asked to ensure that no participant could be identified by their statements. It is our sincere hope that we have preserved the anonymity of the over 100 members of the Black community who participated in the Community Forum.

We want to acknowledge that we could not record everything and, therefore, report on everything that was said at the Forum. We welcome further comments both from those who attended and those who did not attend, but would like to have their experiences included in this research. Please call 902-494-1194 or e-mail rvh@dal.ca if you have anything you would like to contribute.

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I Introduction

In November, 2002, over 100 members of the African Nova Scotian community in Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) gathered at the University of King's College for a day-long community forum sponsored by the Racism, Violence, and Health Project. After a welcoming Libation offered by Wayne Hamilton, the Research Team Leader Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard introduced the project.

The Racism, Violence and Health (RVH) Project is a five-year action research project funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) through its New Emerging Teams initiative. Over the five years, African Canadian researchers will be working with African Canadian research assistants and community members to study the impact of violence – including the violence of racism – on the health and well being of Black community members.

The research begins from the standpoint of those who have witnessed, experienced, and engaged in violence and who live every day with the effects of violence on themselves, their families and their communities. In particular, it explores what happens when Black boys grow up surrounded by stereotypes that assume they are 'trouble', that they will eventually find themselves in conflict with the law. It looks at the impact of these stereotypes of Black masculinity on Black girls, women, and elders as well as on boys and men. It investigates the consequences of resisting and/or being caught in these stereotypes.

After Dr. Bernard's introduction, 10 Talking Circles of Black women, men, and youth talked about how their experiences of racism and violence affect their own health as well as the health and well being of their families and their community. A Talking Circle of non-Black family members also met to discuss their particular concerns.

"I found that getting together as a people allowed us to tell our stories of hurt and pain in a safe environment," one woman wrote in her evaluation of the Community Forum. Another wrote: "I haven't been able to share before." And yet another:

The Forum was so useful because it allowed me to talk with a small group of women who have the same feelings and concerns that I do. It gave me hope. It, for the first time, made me want to share, to be a part of [this research]. It excited me, encouraged me, empowered me – made me recognize my self worth.

In each Talking Circle, beautiful Talking Sticks made by Avery Crawley were passed around the circle from hand to hand as people told their stories. Several participants wrote that the Talking Sticks, combined with Dr. Bernard's discussion concerning community confidentiality and the ethical framework of the research, made them feel safe to speak about things that had only been internalized in the past.

"I shared a painful experience and the group provided emotional support," one young woman wrote. "Just being with others that have been and are still experiencing racism," an older woman offered, "you do not feel so alone." Just being able to "vent," to voice some of the anger and frustration openly and honestly, in a safe setting, was a great relief.

Many of the men spoke about the freedom they felt to express their feelings openly. "The Talking Circle I participated in was a profound experience and opportunity," one man wrote. Another said he made the connection between racism, Black men's mental health, and Black men's survival as his group discussed the effects of racism on the Black family. And yet another man wrote:

I have not made this connection [between racism, health, and violence] before. I think Black people suffer in silence. We are taught to be strong and resilient. As a consequence we are often far too busy engaging in our individual and collective struggles - we ignore or are not aware of our psychological and emotional stresses.

Both men and women recognized the powerful impact of being together as community, being the majority in a single place, affirming community membership. It resulted, one man wrote, in feeling like a "family," a group of people that share a collective experience and also try to respect each other's differences. The Talking Circles, another said, gave us "the opportunity to have dialogue in a respectful way."

Participants wrote about the importance of continuing the dialogue – especially with their children and with young adults. "I feel permission to talk to my grandchildren about being Black," one woman wrote.

Indeed, many participants indicated that they want to move forward in many ways - "we need a plan of action," someone suggested. "Being a part of the movement towards a positive outlook within the Black community," a young man wrote, is very valuable. There has been change, another noted. And we have to keep on striving.

However, an elder commented, it is also useful to step back and “re-visit how racism has affected us and our families, what we used as coping mechanisms and how that shaped us. . . . If coping methods could be facilitated or reinforced, this would help and save our children and grandchildren from having to ‘re-invent the wheel.’”

II Themes From The Talking Circles

After Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard opened the Forum, providing background on both the research project and the day’s activities, Chairperson Alfred Saunders explained that the core activity for the Community Forum involved gathering in Talking Circles of eight to 12 people to share personal experiences of how racism has affected the health of individual participants, their families, and their communities. There were 11 groups – some were Black men only, Black women only, Black youth only, and one group was made up of non-Black men and women who were partners, parents, and grandparents of Black community members.

Each group had a facilitator and a recorder, volunteers who had come together for a training session in the week before the Forum to discuss the Talking Circle process. After the Forum, these volunteers gathered to discuss the powerful impact of the group sharing and to make suggestions for future Forums. The discussion that follows is based on the recorders’ notes and the subsequent discussion. It contains powerful messages, including:

1. Racism makes you sick – It is a disease
2. Racism permeates all aspects of your life – It is poison
3. Racism hurts – And the denial of racism hurts more
4. Not responding to racism is deadly
5. Racism has the power to determine who you are
6. Racism in education – What’s going on?
7. Racism in the workplace – There’s no point of relaxation
8. Non-Black family members: A lot of hurt, a lot of anger, and a lot of isolation
9. Coping with racism is not enough – Healing must happen

1. Racism makes you sick – It is a disease

Talking Circle participants said individual and systemic racism makes them sick- it eats away at their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

From systemic marginalization in the education system to systemic discrimination in the workplace, from cultural incompetence in the health professions to historical and current invisibility in government policy documents, from the sound of the N-word on the playground to the sight of dehumanized Black masculinity in the media, from racialized sexual harassment on the streets to racialized sentencing in the courts, from well-intentioned ignorance to blatant displays of White supremacist propaganda - the everyday costs of pervasive racism cannot be calculated.

Racism is an infectious disease and one of its most insidious symptoms is internalized racism among community members who come to believe what they see and hear every day. From the outside in and the inside out - individuals, families, communities, Canadian society, and the world experience the dis-ease of oppression.

You can't ask if racism affects us, one man said. You can only ask the degree to which we have been affected. "Your life is shortened" by racism-related stress, another man says.

Having to always fight for what you need leads to chronic stress - it also leads to moments of acute crisis:

My whole world fell apart a year ago. I felt alone, hurt. God gave me strength when I found myself in the foetal position on the floor in my kitchen.

This woman was facing extraordinary work pressures. "As a confident Black female, I knew I could do my job," she said. "This racist situation . . . affected my health. Now, I have high blood pressure."

Other participants talked about how racism-related stress affects their health status in terms of diabetes, eczema, cancer, depression, migraines, addictions, panic and anxiety disorders. Reliance on medication, the need to take sick leave - these are the effects of racism-related stress.

"Racism affects our health because of the psychological pressure we face every day," claimed one male participant. It can be psychologically, physically, and emotionally enslaving. This is

particularly true when Black community members, or their family members, turn to alcohol, drugs, and gambling as an escape route. This escape often traps others as these addictions lead to family violence, sexual abuse, and criminal activity.

"Violence comes out often because people don't know how to deal with [systemic discrimination]" another man said. "If we cannot explode at work, we explode at home." Family breakdown or estrangement often results. "Not understanding the impact of racism on Black men [I] couldn't understand the reason for my father's alcoholism," one man said. The stress of trying to protect his family from racism was too much to bear.

2. Racism permeates all aspects of your life - it is poison

"Racism permeates all aspects of your life," another man said. "Our children often don't recognize it." Recounting the effects of "having a little White man calling you the 'N' word" when "this person was a drunk, he was dirty, but you know that he could still get some jobs before me": What are the cumulative effects of this kind of experience?

Participants talked about the costs to their families of facing everyday racism in Halifax Regional Municipality. "As soon as my children could, they left Nova Scotia to live elsewhere," one woman said. Her daughter moved to Montreal – and loves it. Another woman talked through the pain of having to send her grandchildren to family in the United States because she couldn't bear to see the racism they faced everyday in school in Halifax: "Not being able to have my grandchildren in school here has broken up the family. It has hurt me." A male elder said his daughter had received four degrees and is working on a fifth – she works in the United States and he misses her.

In an understatement, many participants agreed that it is "difficult to raise your family in a hostile environment," difficult to expect anyone to stay in a place where they face constant marginalization and discrimination. The costs of staying can be as difficult for the family as the cost of being separated.

One man said that, as a father and a husband, "crisis is all around me with respect to racism" - how can these crises do anything but affect what you have to offer to others. One woman explained that you are

“unable to support family because you are being discriminated against” and there is simply no energy left at the end of the day.

Racism is “a poison that affects the family and the community,” one woman says. And you can’t just walk away from a poisoned atmosphere and think, when you go into Black organizations, even Black churches, that suddenly you’ll be breathing fresh air. Blacks fearing other Blacks is like “spiritual lynching,” one participant said. Yet the effects of internalized racism cannot simply be erased. One woman mentioned “notions of light skin being better, notions of ‘good’ hair” as examples of how African descent people can bring prejudice into their own communities. One man commented that a relative’s concern that he was so dark as a child led to the use of skin bleaching cream “in an attempt to lighten my face.” His analysis: “Rage is focused inwards.”

“A lot of times something happens and it takes my spirit away,” another man said as he related a story about blatant discrimination, violent assault, inadequate police response, and biased sentencing. Immediately following his account was a story of almost invisible ignorance that might have been difficult to prove as an instance of discrimination. The constant repetition of less blatant instances of racism often take a greater toll - they are unrelenting, insect bite after insect bite after insect bite after insect bite. . . .

“Racism is in every aspect of our society”: Having trouble being served in a coffee shop or being ignored by staff in a government agency. Being followed in a store or discovering an advertised apartment suddenly rented. These individual instances make up the fabric of life. One male participant always has difficulty flagging down a taxi. “Once in a while it may be a coincidence,” he says, but when it happens all the time it’s telling you something: “A taxi driver is the pulse of the city so if cabbies are racist, you get a good indication of the city.”

3. Racism hurts – the denial of racism hurts more

White people will not acknowledge the extent of racism within Halifax and Nova Scotia. Participants at the Forum told story after story. When a child retaliates for being called a “Black n-----,” the parents are blamed for moving into a previously non-Black neighbourhood and a petition is taken up to have them move. When your 2 ½ year old child is excluded from a birthday party because of the colour of her skin, it

hurts. When you see your father cry because your friend's family doesn't want him in their house, it hurts.

In the face of this kind of experience, "when people deny that racism exists, it hurts."

This hurt is deep and it is wide, participants said. It is about AIDS in Africa and Black youth on Death Row and the single mother who has no support and the gay man forced to move elsewhere in order to live his life. It's the police coming to the door looking for your Black son because a crime has been committed by somebody, somewhere. It's being raped by your White foster father when you were 10: "The rape only confirmed what White society told me about myself."

"Being Black in this society robs you of your contentment" one man stated simply. You end up "living without the happiness God intended you to enjoy." If you want to survive "don't allow anybody to treat you without dignity." Don't let anyone else's denial of your reality begin to affect your sense of who you are.

4. Not responding to racism is deadly

But how can you hold onto your dignity when, as a child at school, someone says, "There's a girl - she's the same colour as shit"? This young woman says that she lashed out in violence and rage as a protective mechanism. As a result, of course, she was considered the problem. As a consequence, she has learned to contain those responses, but what is the cost of containment?

I have difficulty expressing my feelings around these issues. I have pushed it down so long that it is painful to think about them.

"It's killing me," another woman said. "We are internally volcanic when we don't express. It's physiological stress. White people are afraid of our anger and so we don't want to act angry." In her case, the anger makes its way out through her skin as a constant rash.

"I push these feelings down and it takes away a part of me," says one. "You try to cope, but everyday you push those feelings down and they eat at you," says another. Yet, when you do speak up, you are frequently informed that you are "so thin-skinned - everything's race."

Given the pervasive denial of racism, many participants spoke of the negative health consequences of constantly questioning their own perceptions of their experiences: "Racism has a huge effect on me, on my health," one young adult said. "It causes me to second-guess myself – what I do, what I can do." Another says they never escape the anxiety of wondering what everyone else thinks: "it makes you uncomfortable; it makes you do the wrong thing."

Racism has affected me because I experience self-doubt. I wonder, is it me or just that I am a Black woman? I need time to reflect and think about those issues. Usually I just push those thoughts aside.

A young woman says she has a constant internal dialogue: "Is this racism? It feels like it. But how do I deal with it?"

Nevertheless, in retrospect, many participants realized they have begun to realize the extent to which racism introduced violence into their lives:

I started to think about violence as an everyday part of my life, glasses broken, threatened, called out of my name. I never thought of this as violence. Now I wonder how this has affected me.

Another participant summarized the effect racism has on her: "I'm sick and tired of feeling sick and tired." The stress of always having to cope is profound.

One way to move beyond simply coping, many participants emphasized the need to teach Black children how to proactively respond to racism because the denial in the rest of society has so many negative consequences: "We must tell children the truth about these issues around race, racism, and how to deal with these issues."

5. Racism has the power to determine you are who

"Racism determines who you are," several participants said in different ways. "You want to be who you are, but people won't let you." They feel they already know who you are just because you are Black: "We suppress ourselves to fit into dominant society," including the stereotypes that White society holds about Black people.

One woman says her five-year old grand-daughter is already being given the message that "Black children are bad." If this is the message

that she is given at such a young age, she wondered, is it any wonder Black children are angry? Looking at herself, she says, "I wonder what I could have become" if she had not experienced the constraints of racism and consequent poverty. At one point, she says, "I became clinically depressed."

In particular, the negative portrayals of Black men and women in the media have serious individual and social consequences. "White people are afraid of Black people," claimed one participant. "People are afraid of us because we're Black." And Black parents are afraid for their children – in particular their sons who are angry and turning to music videos to find their role models.

But is it any wonder they are angry, participants ask? This is what happens to "cute little Black boys who become scary Black males within our society." They have very few options of how to respond to "hitting that wall of racism." Too often, "they hurt us." The constant emotional and spiritual assaults of everyday racism will eventually be expressed - either internally or externally, either constructively or destructively.

Sometimes, Black men hurt their families and communities when they internalize the stereotypes of Black women - and then inflict those stereotypes on their mothers, sisters, partners, daughters. Negative stereotypes can result in broken families or broken bones, but presumably positive stereotypes - "women are the backbone of the community" - can also result in broken bodies and spirits. "Stop trying to be everything to everybody!" one woman advised. Otherwise, you will burn out, you will extinguish yourself.

6. Racism in education – what's going on?

African Nova Scotian youth experience racism in schools, and are consistently marginalised by educators' insensitivity, reduced expectations, and lack of support. Generations of African Nova Scotians receiving this type of treatment demonstrate the existence of systemic discrimination in educational institutions. Black educators are often in the difficult position of witnessing this discrimination, feeling powerless to stop it, and experiencing discrimination themselves.

Several participants talked about being held back in school, being streamed into non-academic courses, or being passed despite not learning the material. "There are kids in Grade 12 who can't read and

write. What's going on?" asked one female elder. How is that going to affect their future - their ability to look after their own health and well-being and that of their families? And there are a great many Black children who don't make it to Grade 12.

The drop-out rate reflects the lack of attention given Black youth. "Kids are being told not to have expectations, to settle for less," one participant said. "We are told 'your kids can't excel.'" Because their parents experienced discrimination in the schools, "when kids go to [the high school], they don't see their parents pictures on the wall like White kids do." They incorporate the belief that they shouldn't be there either, and they leave.

Some parents have resorted to putting their children in private schools - "we couldn't afford it, but we did it," says one participant. Those who don't have that option, have to find ways around the obstacles their children face in getting an education. One participant told his Talking Circle that supporting a child who is being forced to make a class presentation on the book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, when she considers that book racist, has led to family stress and community tensions. Why does that have to happen? What is so important about one book when the educational success of children is at stake?

Some now wonder if the segregated schools weren't better: "With segregated schools . . . people used their creativeness and energy," they worked together to overcome obstacles rather than every individual having to work on their own.

Kids aren't graduating, poverty is rampant, communication is hindered because we don't have our physical communities anymore.

Black educators observe the discrimination against these students. They hear teachers speak negatively about Black students - and have their objections ignored. They see the stress in the students and they experience the stress in themselves.

Black educators become teachers based on our love of children - Black children. This is our way to give back because we have gone through the system. We are there for all the kids, the kids respond to us. There are no bad kids. They are hurt, troubled, misdirected, not loved.

Witnessing the racism in schools and feeling how little they can do individually to counteract it causes significant stress. This is especially true because many of the solutions were identified in the BLAC Report

on Education (1994) ? a report whose recommendations have never been enacted.

Those youth who have gone on to university constantly deal with the same kinds of condescension and false assumptions. "I pay \$11,000 each year to be insulted every day in class," one student recounted. "Every day I shake my head and say, 'what kind of society is this?'" A young woman was told "You're not here to learn about Malcolm X" when she tried to insert some colour into a completely White curriculum: "I left this campus always crying."

Nevertheless, education is often seen as the key to progress, and participants acknowledged the importance of making education a priority. "Education is the key," not only for fostering individual achievement, but also for dispelling stereotypes and challenging racism intellectually. Africentric education is particularly important for countering the notion that Africans were savages and for giving children the cultural pride that can insulate them against racist experiences: "When I have kids, I'm going to send them to Africa so they can get some pride before they feel the world," one young adult said.

7. Racism in the workplace – there's no point of relaxation

A great many Community Forum participants spoke of discrimination and racism in the workplace. Sometimes this racism is repressively systemic, sometimes it is painfully individual.

Participants identified the physical, emotional, and spiritual costs of being the only Black person in a workplace. When you have to be better to be considered equal, you can never allow yourself to stop measuring yourself against others. When you can't afford to make a mistake, you "can't come to a point of relaxation" and simply take your own competence for granted. The constant questioning erodes your confidence and increases an already existing sense of isolation. I'm "always out there, having to prove myself," one man said. "We are always on guard," said another.

One man talked of a workplace where, one day, another visible minority acknowledged the pain he must have been going through because of discrimination and racism. Simply because of that one

conversation, "for the rest of my time there I could go to work in some dignity."

"There is no fun to being the only Black person," one man stated baldly. Since you are considered representative of your race, any failure is not simply personal. You bring down the whole community with you. When you succeed, unfortunately, you don't raise the community – you raise suspicions about whether you could actually have done the work yourself. Someone else is sought to take the credit. Or, you are told that you're different than your Black brothers and sisters. The implication: that good work cannot be Black work. "Always having to prove how smart you are," takes its toll. So does being "boxed" in – categorized as having expertise only about racism or Black experience – even if that is not why you were hired.

Even well-intentioned co-workers can worsen that sense of being "other" than what is considered the norm. As one participant suggested, White privilege allows people "to say [something] without knowing the consequences." Offhand comments, implicit assumptions, simple not-knowing – the everyday instances of ignorance often lead to a sense that you are also having to educate your peers. "Sometimes I just tell people – 'I'm off-duty,'" says one woman. "I'm not doing any more educating today."

It's tiring to be "always explaining that racism occurs and this is how," said another woman, especially when your explanations are discounted or denied. Verbal attacks by customers, clients, and patients are one thing. When you are attacked by co-workers "it's unacceptable," another man said. He pointed out that when people want to find your weakness, the first thing they do is attack you through your colour. You can understand that, and still it hurts. It hurts even more, however, if another person of colour feels they can survive only if they join in the attack against you.

Added to the pain of individual racism is the blatant discrimination that leads to lack of advancement or earned compensation. After recounting how only he and one other Black employee were passed over for a raise in his workplace, one man said, "It hurts because why am I considered different?" One woman told how she went back to school while working the night shift in order to increase her qualifications to the point where she couldn't be denied promotion: "What does this do to the family?"

Another man told the story of being denied recognition for his long years of service in his job. "But I could not be destroyed," he concluded. He would not become bitter or be silenced – he would not turn his pain inward and he would not stop rebelling against the system.

A number of participants spoke of not being recognised as a professional. A school principal told of waiting for a parent to come in for a meeting. Upon arrival, the parent walked straight by him. "A Black male isn't supposed to be a principal. A custodian but not a principal." When parents realize that he is, indeed, the principal "they have to lower their tone." Another man told of waiting to be met at the airport only to discover later that his potential colleague had left without him, assuming he would be White and thus not recognizing his very existence.

Some Blacks who achieve advancement may have done so because they "get along" with mainstream society, one man said. Part of that getting along includes accepting mainstream views of your own people. You can't advocate for those you deny, he suggests. You can't advocate if you believe the only way to move yourself and your family forward is by keeping your head and your voice lowered. He has been encouraged "not to make trouble" because it might hinder his own chance of success. His own belief that he can communicate effectively without silencing himself gives him strength. Another participant supported this view: "My coping strategy is doing things for my people," he said.

8. Non-Black family members - A lot of hurt, a lot of anger, and a lot of isolation

Non-Black family members of African Nova Scotians experience, "a lot of hurt, a lot of anger, and a lot of isolation." Participants in the Talking Circle that included both the partners of Black Nova Scotians, the White adoptive or birth parents of Black children, and grandparents of Black children spoke of anxiety, stomach pains, and chronic headaches as a result of racism-related stress.

This is due to what many of these participants described as the "loss of innocence," that results from learning exactly "how significant race is" in Nova Scotian society. These non-Black family members are often in a position where they have to think about the importance of race and

racism daily. They are in a position where their interracial relationships are the object of scorn, their adopted or multiracial children and grandchildren are isolated and/or considered exotic, and they experience first-hand the housing discrimination that too many African Nova Scotians have faced all their lives.

The pain of seeing loved ones suffer was overwhelmingly the dominant experience cited by these participants. "When my son hurts, I hurt – that is love," explained one woman. Again and again, people mentioned the agony of seeing their partners and/or their children face discrimination: "I get angry at a world who treats me and my husband and the people I love like we don't matter."

Non-Black family members worried about their children being exposed to racist insults and violence. One participant noted that their school seems to have lower expectations for Black children. Another mentioned that her husband was deliberately splashed with mud by a police cruiser. Another participant told of an incident where their son was leaning on his hands in class and the teacher asked: "Is that how you people got big lips?"

Another theme was the stress of witnessing the internalized racism and isolation faced by their partners, children, and grandchildren. One mother agonized over the fact that her daughter experienced racist insults but not confided in her. Another mother talked about her daughter's struggles with Eurocentric notions of beauty.

Some of these parent's children also have to deal with the isolation that comes from being in an almost exclusively White environment. Because of this, a number of these children often end up feeling like they are ostracized or marginalized from the Black community.

Talking about race and racism can be a difficult and sensitive process for non-Black family members. A number described themselves as being in a constant process of learning. A degree of anxiety was present due to the "feeling that I can't understand because I'm not Black." A mother who mentioned the pain she experiences when she sees her son discriminated against added that it is "made worse when I have not and cannot ever truly experience what it is that has made him hurt."

Many of the participants were also exposed to a significant degree of inadvertent anti-Black racism from people around them. Sometimes this was the result of others assuming that because they were White

they would share these views. Accordingly, one person explained how she always makes very clear to others where she stands on these issues.

The non-Black family members with Black partners spoke of losing friends because of their relationship and of feeling incredibly frustrated when people deny or dismiss the significance of racism. "They just don't get it," explained one woman. Confrontations with family members over racist attitudes and remarks were particularly painful. These experiences cause the participants to become extremely vigilant (especially with family and friends) about racism.

A common cause of stress is the powerlessness that many feel over challenging racism. This powerlessness amplifies the pain of seeing loved ones suffer. One adoptive father mentioned how frustrated he became when, even in his position of relative power, he was unable to get anyone to seriously deal with the racism his child faced at school. Parents in particular struggled over this "sense of powerlessness for someone we love" and the added stress over the feeling that, "we can't fix it."

There were some spaces of support for the parents and partners of African Nova Scotians. One woman mentioned the understanding of her father as being helpful. Another mentioned that despite all of the pain, her husband's and her love of their multiracial child sustained them. Other people in a similar situation can also provide considerable support. For example, one parent mentioned how much comfort and support his family received when their child was protected by another Black child who had White adoptive parents.

In some cases, the African United Baptist church has become a place where isolated Black children could connect with the Black community and nurture a positive self-image. When one couple started taking their son to the Baptist church they were delighted over the fact that "he suddenly had ten grandmothers!"

9. Coping with racism is not enough – healing must happen

Throughout the Community Forum, participants talked about the different ways in which they “coped” with the effects of everyday individual, collective, and systemic racism. But, clearly, coping is not enough. Change has to happen and healing has to happen. Increased communication, humour, spirituality, and community-based action - all were mentioned as part of the process of moving forward.

In the end, one woman said, “What we are doing today needs to happen more.” Sharing stories provides hope and encouragement. It also enables individuals to develop a sense of purpose. “We all need a purpose and a lot of people have lost a sense of purpose,” someone said.

Beyond encouragement, however, African Nova Scotians also express a desire to be, “recognised for what we do.” One young man emphasized that it was “nice to hear of people doing well and people striving to do more.” Another added, “it makes me feel good when we have good things happen to us and they sometimes do.” “People don’t expect us to be this way,” another suggested, “but as Black men we must realize that we are stronger than people give us credit for.”

And, of course, many men and women talked about the strength they receive from their Christian faith and spiritual practice. Over the centuries, faith has provided African Nova Scotians with the motivation, dignity, strength, and creativity to achieve pro-active change. While many continue to look for leadership within the church, some suggested that honouring traditional spirituality would also have positive consequences for building a stronger Black community. The foundation of healing, said one woman, is feeling love: “Make sure you share your love for each other.”

“Healing has to take place within the community,” many participants argued. Nurturing the skills of the community in a positive direction can help deal with the isolation that causes many African Nova Scotians to lose their way when trying to counteract individual, collective, and systemic racism. Leadership is needed to help diverse communities find a stronger political voice.

Many community members have developed leadership skills and abilities - now they need to work together, respectfully, so that scarce resources can be increased. One woman talked about the need for trust: “I need to know someone has my back. I need someone to say, ‘Yes, I know who she is. I know what her intentions are’.” If we act as

if “we are afraid that someone will get above us,” another added, then we all stay at the bottom.

“We have libraries of strategies, but nothing has been implemented,” participants argued. This is because there are too few community members who have the authority to move things forward. Even without authority, however, if a unified position that respects difference could be achieved, then an umbrella Black community organization could make a difference. “There are too many organisations that work . . . with too many conflicting ideas,” someone argued. African Nova Scotians need a provincial or umbrella organisation that represents people of African descent.

Sue Edmonds - co-chair of the Health Association of African Canadians (HAAC), mental health nurse, and community activist - supported the importance of having a focus for action. She emphasized the importance of understanding racism as a determinant of health and the health costs of race-related stress. Keeping it all inside is not the answer, she said. “Depression robs you of your sense of self. . . . We can’t give back to our communities if we are down on ourselves.”

Instead, Ms Edmonds said, “we need to be “full of business.” We need to look at the strength of our parents and honour them - recognize how far they brought us. They may not have said much, “but they showed up.” And, by showing up, they made a difference. There used to be stronger community organizations as well as umbrella organizations. For our children and grandchildren, we have to remember what worked and build on it: “We have to be there. We have to take the chance.”

III Forum Feedback and Advice to the Research Team

Toward the end of the Community Forum, participants completed an evaluation that asked for feedback not only on the Forum itself but also on the five-year action research project. They were asked to give advice to the Research Team members working out of Halifax, Toronto, and Calgary. Their advice focused on the importance of ongoing communication and community involvement, including community-based presentations, workshops, focus groups, and interviews.

Participants also outlined their understanding of the most important issues of health and well-being facing the Black community. They emphasized that the health of individuals and families depends on the health of the community, that racism-related stress is at the root of health concerns, and that it is essential to educate not only community members but also health and social service professionals and policy-makers about racism as a determinant of health. They pointed out that although research and information-sharing are a form of action, they are not enough. Both must lead to community-based action grounded in the unity that comes from respect for diversity.

As part of that movement toward action, participants made recommendations for the second Community Forum to be held in the fall of 2003.

1. Ongoing communication and community involvement must be part of the research process

Participants suggested that, if the research is going to be useful, the Research Team has to be involved with the Black community. Community members must be asked to identify their concerns and have input into the strategies for addressing those concerns. Already-existing organizations and resources need to be used and every effort should be made not to duplicate what already exists. One participant suggested that community members and organizations must also do their part - they must work together and not against each other if they are going to be of use to the research.

Over and over, participants wrote in their evaluations that there must be ongoing communication between the research project and the community. Information must be circulated on a regular basis so that community members can be "up-to-date with the process and progress of the project" and thus provide meaningful input. They should have a way to respond to the "ponderings" of the research team, not just their final conclusions. And the research team should have an ongoing understanding of what is happening in the community as well. Project representatives should be visible at community events and regularly attend meetings that will inform them about what is happening in the different HRM communities.

Results from events like the Community Forum need to be made public and every effort must be made to reach a wide variety of community members - not just those already connected to the project. While the

Community Forum report should be made available to all registrants, there should also be a sincere attempt to help people who were not at the Community Forum understand that they are not alone in their feelings and experiences.

Results should be published in "a reader-friendly format" such as booklets and brochures. Again, each age-group and socio-economic group should be seen as the audience for these materials - this means the language and format needs to be adapted for different groups of people, especially youth in the schools.

Both the North Branch Library on Gottingen Street and the African United Baptist Churches were cited as resources that should be used to publicize the findings of the research and provide access to materials as they are developed.

Participants felt that presentations and workshops should be developed for both large and small groups in each of the nine historic Black communities. This will allow findings to be shared in a way that will engage the community in follow-up action. It will also make the project more visible in the communities. Planning and publicity for these events must include a consideration of the needs and interests of youth and elders, those who are already involved in community activities, and those who may feel they do not have a significant role in already existing community organizations.

They also suggested that the project arrange to hold many different kinds of focus groups - gender specific, mixed, youth, senior, single mothers, dual caregiver families - in order to sustain the kinds of sharing that happened in the Talking Circles. Existing organizations could be used to plan and promote these events. Also, interviews with individuals and families should be arranged to get a more in-depth sense of community members' concerns about racism, violence, and the impact on health and well-being.

2. The health and well-being of Black individuals and families depend on the health and well-being of Black communities

A key symptom of unrelenting everyday racism and systemic discrimination was at the centre of participants' concerns about the health and well-being issues facing members of the Black community: The erosion of community strength. "The health and the well being of African Nova Scotians is tied in to the community," one woman wrote.

"Racism and violence . . . are killing our communities," wrote another. Summarizing the views of a great many, another stated: Racism doesn't have to be directed at you to have an impact on you. The community is a target rather than the individual.

"We need to remove the parochial feelings of small communities to realize that our needs are common to all," an elder responded. "By speaking loudly and clearly with a determined voice, change cannot be denied." Unless we "take back our communities," said another, we will not get past "the internal racism that causes Blacks not to support each other."

Many participants expressed their concern about "internalized oppression" and the isolation that arises from believing the lies society tells about Black people and their possibilities for accomplishment.

We need more respect for ourselves. We need to learn to recognize we are all important in our community. Whether you are a custodian, nurse, doctor, city worker, or cleaner - we are all to be respected.

In particular, this participant continued, "Let our children know they are loved and protected by us, their community." Supporting this position, another suggested that

Racism is killing the Black community and our human race. We, as African Nova Scotians, need to reclaim our history in order to make sure that the children have . . . opportunities.

"The drum was once the heart beat of the community," a young man responded. "It could be important for African Canadians to experience our culture in a positive light to gain a true experience of part of the culture we lost."

3. Education is required to make the connection between racism and health and well-being

There was a consensus among participants that the stress of fighting ongoing battles against racism, the struggle of living in a racist society, "is a major health concern for African Nova Scotians." The struggle of living in a racist society leads to feelings of powerlessness. That powerlessness has to be addressed with information and education about the effects of chronic racism-related stress. We need "strategies to heal individuals, families, and communities," one

participant wrote. And those strategies need to move us "beyond survival," beyond simply coping.

Coupled with concerns about basic literacy are concerns about health literacy: "understanding how the health system works, how to access services, how to advocate for more health services." There is an urgent need for "psychological and mental health support mechanisms that can support the family," one participant wrote. "They need to be physically, financially, and emotionally accessible." That need to be "emotionally" accessible is crucial when there are too few African Nova Scotian health professionals and when non-Black service providers, even the most well-intentioned, do not understand the insidious effects of racism.

For example, hypertension is a physical manifestation of racism-related stress, one woman wrote. It arises in response to the "continued segregation and stereotypes that the system" supports, that the institutions do little if anything to change.

"EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION" must be at the centre, wrote one participant. Others echoed this, emphasizing "education about racial issues affecting African Nova Scotians and their communities," including the need "to address [internalized racism and its impact] in an effective, safe way," not only within communities, but with "educators, employers, and health practitioners." Only then will everyone have the opportunity to develop "ways to cope with the effects of racism."

A male elder wrote:

I consider it important for us to be conscious of the factors affecting our health next, we have to do something about it. We must not allow ourselves to be cast in the role of victims. Victims do not go forward. We must focus on recovering our health.

Prevention education concerning health issues facing African Nova Scotians is essential - and that education must "circulate effectively in the community" and not remain in the possession of a few.

Agreeing that there are many factors affecting the health of African Canadians, one woman wrote that it is essential to have a complex understanding of health:

I believe there is not one important issue but they are all equally important. Truly one issue affects the others. If you are mentally unstable, then the physical and spiritual are affected. If the spiritual is affected, then the mental and physical are affected, so I believe they are all intertwined.

Health services and health professionals, in particular, need to be made aware of what the research is finding. The data should be used to challenge all systems and communities to respond. Black and non-Black individuals, organizations, and institutions - including the media - need to work together and share the responsibility for making change. In this way, we can continue "to improve the strength of the Black Community" and "to understand how important it is to be yourself and be proud."

4. The research and education must lead to community-based action if real change is to take place

The impetus toward some form of action is extraordinarily strong. One participant referred back to Sue Edmonds' talk about racism as a determinant of health: "We are suffering in silence. We need a place and time to give our voice." And everyone must become involved; the same participant reflected on Dr. Bernard's statement that "You're not successful unless you use that success to help others."

"Somewhere, somehow, someone/s must start the action," another wrote. "I feel we are all willing HOWEVER where, when, and how do we go from here? We all care about our families, community, and, above all, our precious Black children." But there are many barriers to overcome. These barriers are material, political, emotional, and communal, participants wrote - and so are their solutions. There must be avenues to address both "the lack of information and the power to speak." There must be a commitment to "loving one another and speaking . . . when we see each other on the street." There must be a willingness to believe in God and to support each other through dialogue, to learn "to respect ourselves and others . . . to work together."

Historical oppression combined with its most pernicious effect - "a lack of trust in our own Black people" - has resulted in feelings of powerlessness. Systemic racism in the education system and the consequences of workplace discrimination has resulted in an "exclusion from opportunity." This exclusion takes its toll on the confidence of so

many - especially the youth. "Unemployment and underemployment has brought stress and frustration to most Black Nova Scotians," one young woman wrote. "Their achievements not recognized, their mistakes exaggerated and penalized," a male elder responded, results in an "inability to aim high and take risks."

Overall, participants suggested that research and education must be concrete and provide support for individuals in their daily lives. For example, specific suggestions were made about developing educational materials that will help people, especially youth, cope with the racism and violence they face every day. Even more specifically, one participant wrote, Black professionals could become involved in homework centres.

Whatever solutions are suggested, they should be "doable" - and the research team should be committed to following up on the recommendations. Programs must be developed and implemented to address issues that community members identify. This research must result in action, one wrote, "especially in reference to our Youth."

But the research team cannot act alone, another participant acknowledged. The research results should be passed on to many others so there can be a concerted effort. Black organizations and agencies need to be involved, as do legislators in the municipal, provincial, and federal governments. The results of the research need to be used as an educational tool for the non-Black community - especially the many allies and well-intentioned people who do not really understand the issues.

Working together, change can happen at every level, in the individual, the family, the community, the government and institutions where policy is developed. If Black communities can unite, then they can "develop a framework for the health and well-being of Black communities," one woman said. "This would allow us to deal with some of our internal struggles as well as our issues with the broader society."

5. The next Community Forum should strive for more time, more people, more diversity

Community members who attended the Forum said that next year they want more opportunities to meet, they want more people to meet with, and they want a schedule that allows both more time for the Talking Circles and the possibility of participating in more than one Talking Circle. While the designation of Talking Circles as men-only, women-only, youth, and non-Black family members was strongly appreciated, there was also the sense that moving from those circles into others mixed by race, gender, and age would also be useful and powerful.

The overwhelming support for the Talking Circles focused on how they were “extremely healing,” offering participants an opportunity to not only share their individual experiences but also strengthen their sense of community. With a few exceptions, participants strongly supported the use of the Talking Sticks and asked that facilitators continue to receive training in the positive aspects of consistently using this process. “The Talking Stick was a powerful tool,” one participant wrote. Others commented that people who had never before spoken in such a public gathering felt comfortable with the support of being uninterrupted and not having to compete for air time with those who feel more entitlement to speak more often or more forcefully. Nevertheless, there were a few who suggested that the Talking Stick might be used in combination with free discussion or might be requested rather than handed around the circle.

Participants suggested that the Forum take place over more than one day and, ideally, more than once a year. Several pointed out the benefits of more time for socializing, for interactive feedback and question and answer sessions, and the discussion of specific topics, especially the mental health consequences of racism and race-related stress. Others requested more space for discussions among bi-racial parents and bi-racial children. Someone suggested community members need to discuss concerns about violence within Black communities such as gun- and drug-related crime and family violence. The importance of having childcare available was also mentioned.

The second most common response centred on the importance of involving more young adults, especially more young men, of providing space for them to talk about their past and current experiences, articulate their dreams, and develop strategies to deal with the impact of racism and violence on their everyday lives. While many participants

commented positively about the presence of community members with professional education and employment, they also suggested that the Forums be organized to attract more diversity in terms of education and income. They also suggested wider publicity, a different location in the community, and a request that the research team give us clues as to how to approach friends, colleagues to encourage them to come. How do I answer: "We need less study and more action!"

As well as more youth and individuals with more diverse socio-economic background, participants asked that the team encourage the attendance of more elders, more clergy, more men, and more Black community organizations.

The Community Forums should also provide an opportunity for people to strategize, "make it happen." "Next year I would like to move forward to seeking solutions to our problems," one participant wrote, suggesting that both short- and long-term planning are essential. And some participants said they need to leave the Forums with information on how to take these issues back to the community and really work on the problems. We're all aware of the problem – Now what do we do?

In particular, it was suggested that the research project could "capitalize on the energy and commitment of participants to follow through on ideas" and become central to the development of an umbrella organization that might provide one voice for Black communities and Black community members.

Drawing on Dr. Bernard's remarks during the Forum, however, another participant suggested that team members need to be clear that the research project cannot come up with results that are "an immediate fix to the problems that exist." "To face the problem is a starting point that can help people," this person suggested. Everyone will have to take responsibility for moving forward from that point.

IV Acknowledgements

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Reference Group:

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Project Staff:

The current project staff includes Bethan Lloyd (Research Coordinator), Alaina Wright (Project Research Assistant), Selom Chapman-Nyaho and Barb Hamilton-Hinch (Research Assistants).

Questionnaire Research Assistants:

Also working with the RVH Project are interviewers Kim Bernard, James Byers, Raphael Eghan, Satie Katwaroo, Darcel Williams-Hart, Brandon Rolle, and Alfred Saunders