Springtime was in bloom as I pulled up in the parking lot of the Tennessee State Correctional Facility for Women. I got out of my car and headed toward the reception area. I was due to talk with a group of inmates about their lives, their families, their experiences with the police, and crime in and around the housing projects. The atmosphere at the prison was tense. Two women awaited execution on death row. As I walked toward reception, a startling juxtaposition of images confronted me. The first was a cluster of flowering Bradford pear trees, thick and creamy against the skyline. The night before I had seen similar luxurious blooms as I traveled through a wealthy new subdivision of Nashville to interview a senior police officer at his home. The second image was the concertina wire surrounding the prison complex, confining a motley collection of supposedly dangerous individuals.
Amid laughter, tears, cussing, and poking fun, rich information emerged from the conversations. At some point in their lives, these women’s intimate male partners had beaten them. Holly had lived in the Nashville housing projects most of her life. She was serving time for fighting back against her violent husband. Her story provides a neat segue into my discussion of the policing of domestic violence. Holly told her story with great humor and panache. I sensed that she had told it several times before.

This man got the gun, he’s talkin’ about how he’s fixin’ to blow my brains out. I got on the phone to 911, “Please y’all, 911, somebody please hurry, please hurry.” I hear the gun click... “Pa-ching.” Dead blew up the waterbed. The woman on the other end [dispatcher] said, “Madam, what’s goin’ on? Madam what’s goin’ on?... [laughter] I’m sayin’, “Lady help! The man got a fuckin’ gun, lady help!”... I’m up on the big waterbed, now water goin’ everywhere... and the woman said, “Don’t cuss, lady, don’t cuss.” [laughter]

What the hell you talkin’ about “don’t cuss?” [laughter]

I was sick of bein’ bruised. I can’t see. Got to open my eyes with my hand. He said, “Bitch, I’m goin’ to bed.” He went up an’ he went to bed. I pour me some grits and water, like I see my momma do to my daddy, and I sit there, and I sit there, and grits and the water got together. I put in some sugar. I just pulled the cover back, started pouring from the top of his head all the way down to his mouth. Police come, “Lady... why didn’t you call us?” I said, “You ignorant motherfuckers, if you check 911 I called y’all three hours ago tellin’ you this man is shootin’.... This waterbed is blown to hell, holes all in the mattress, great big old holes in the wall, water done just messed up everythin’... and that was a sawed-off double barrel, he meant business.” Police said, “Well, we gonna have to carry you in.” I said, “Carry me in?” They carried me down...

Well you call them police, you call police an’ you hang up the telephone, they’ll get there quicker than you would callin’ ‘em... and tellin’ ‘em there’s somethin’ goin’ on. They’ll call right back to make sure you’re okay... [laughter] Well this happened just recently. I just found this out. My uncle, he called the police station, and told them that he was gonna blow it up, and they came an’ got him immediately. [laughter] They took me to jail for aggravated assault. They told me the sugary grits was the weapon. They said that sugar in that grits was just like glue—it peeled all his skin.

Elaine told her story quietly, without sarcasm, and with a deeply depressed affect lubricated with tears. Elaine perceived that she contributed to her own victimization by giving her abusive partner authority to “take that much possession over my life.” She drew much support from people at the table as she recalled her abusive husband’s surveillance and torture, and the resistive violence she used against him that eventually led to her incarceration.

He was possessive. I gave him that authority over me to take that much possession over my life. The jobs I had, every job I had while I was with him for eleven years, had to be to his standards, the clothes I wore... he had to go to the shopping mall with me and make sure that my skirts wasn’t too short... my pants wasn’t too tight, um, when we went out to eat I had to sit with my face like this in the plate and eat. I couldn’t look at nobody. Somebody recognize me and he says, “Who that!!... You know and stuff like that, and then, you know, a lot of times I blame myself for stayin’ with him as long as I did because I figured if I hadn’t stayed with him as long as I did, he wouldn’t been able to continue to abuse me. But, when you in love with somebody you take stuff like that... This man stabbed me in my leg with a butcher knife, he beat me up... and then would try to have sex with me. After he done beat me, he talk about how I look beautiful with my face all swelled. I got knots on the top of my forehead, but I look beautiful to him with all these knots and stuff. He like just to see me like that because he knew that nobody else would want me. But he beat me up one time too many, I got hurt. I did like she [Holly] did. I let him go. I made love to him. I let him go to sleep. When he woke up I was sittin’ in his chair stabbin’ him with a steak knife. ...

I took him and drug him to the car, took him to Vanderbilt Hospital, called his mom, and told her, “I just almost killed your son for puttin’ his hands on me.” They handcuffin’ me at
the hospital. He told the police, he said “Naw, I don’t want to press no charges against her.” And I looked at him, I said, “You shouldn’t! Look at me.” An’ I told police, I said “Look at my damn face—he done beat me stupid, an’ I’m not supposed to do anything to him? And you all gonna take me to jail?” See, that’s what I can’t understand. When we fight back to protect ourselves, the law wants to lock us up.

I attended domestic disturbances in poorer neighborhoods of Nashville, interviewed two groups of mostly black women from the Tennessee State Penitentiary for Women, and talked with twenty or so other women at domestic violence and homeless shelters. Many of these women had remained silent about their victimization for long periods of time. They attributed their silence to fear of retribution, love of their abusers, shame, embarrassment, wanting to keep the family together, relying on his paycheck, and hope that things might change.

Cecilia, a black woman, endured three violently abusive relationships from 1986 to 1997. She talked about domestic violence in the black community. “I heard my mom talk about how my grandfather abused her and his family. She was from a family of nine children. I’ve heard other stories like that. In the black community people want to keep it hush-hush. This is a family matter. This is nobody else’s business.”

One night at a refuge in a run-down neighborhood in East Nashville, I attended a support group meeting for ten black battered women. At the meeting Alicia told me that some black women would not automatically call the police if beaten. She told me that the projects offered little privacy. Calling the police, for whatever reason, violated that privacy. Given the street violence in the projects, one can understand Alicia’s sentiment. She also observed that some black female victims of domestic violence engaged in illegal activities that made calling the police problematic. “The environment that they’re living in, you don’t call all the time, ya know, because everything is everybody’s business and you know they don’t want people to know what’s going on behind closed doors. A lot of times the woman could be involved in some illegal action and she might not speak out about domestic violence.”

Bessie, the support group facilitator, talked of the courage of black women coming together to share their victimization.

When you think about it historically, this whole issue of domestic violence for women of color, and black women in particular . . . was kept hidden, and unless you talked to your doctor, your pastor, unless you were able to speak to your friend next door, you kept it between the family members. This support group is really a new way of fighting back in terms of speaking out, to come and talk about what’s going on in their homes. We have to not only work through the mistrust of the system, but we have to . . . trust one another. It’s amazing that we have these women who actually are very courageous to even take the steps to enter into that healing process of speaking out and doing whatever they can to keep themselves safe.

Many black women I talked with highlighted a deep-seated historical resistance to opening up black family life to scrutiny. Black women passed down this resistance across many generations, which may indeed trace an unbroken line back to Africa. Black women withheld information about familial conflict and domestic violence as a means of preserving the integrity of black kinship systems in the face of slavery and its aftermath. Given this cultural legacy, it makes sense that black battered women would see the family as a respite from a deeply racist world and would hesitate before calling authorities. It is likely that black family life alleviated the pressures of slavery in different ways for black men and women. During slavery and beyond, black women endured interpersonal violence at the hands of black men within those families, just as they endured rape, sexual assault, whippings, and other forms of ritualized violence and control by white slavers.1 Though it may have been the case that white planters prohibited slave men from assaulting their partners, white men had the right to beat women to maintain discipline on the plantations. How this affected black women’s senses of their families as potential respite and how these understandings influenced their willingness to report their abusive black male partners needs more exploration.

As Herbert Gutman shows, the black family endured many hardships during slavery. Referring to evidence from Mississippi and northern Louisiana slaves, Gutman notes that “about one in six [or seven] slave marriages [was] ended by force or sale.” He goes on to observe that most slave sales apart from estate divisions and bankruptcies involved teenagers and young adults. Slave parents hated slave owners
for making such sales. Specifically, Gutman comments, "‘Good’ masters hesitated making such sales; ‘bad’ masters did not; all masters poisoned the relationship between slave parents and their children." Undoubtedly, the black family lived with the threat of the potential sale of one or more of its members. Just as it did not recognize slave marriages, the law did not protect the black family. However, Gutman's work established that most blacks lived in nuclear families during slavery and that black men and women sought out marriage during nineteenth-century Reconstruction as a legal way to confirm and sanctify their unions and bolster the black family. He notes that upon emancipation "most Virginia ex-slave families had two parents, and most older couples had lived together in long-lasting unions." Strongly disagreeing with Daniel Patrick Moynihan's influential work on the black family, Gutman argues that the post-World War II migration of blacks northward caused significant family breakup. Gutman attributed this breakup not to the "tangle of family pathology" rooted in slavery (Moynihan's argument) but to the chronically high unemployment and underemployment that greeted blacks displaced from the rapidly mechanizing system of southern agriculture. Put simply, blacks could not earn sufficient money to support family life in northern cities. The rise of global capitalism exacerbated this unemployment and underemployment, particularly from 1980 onward.

That blacks have had to fight to preserve, further extend, and develop their kinship systems in the face of pressures such as unemployment and underemployment reminds us of their deep commitment to family values. In their long and oppressive history, blacks really have put families first. This concern to protect family life is one of the roots of the deep compromise faced by black battered women in the housing projects of Nashville. It was only during the twentieth-century redemption (1980–2000) that domestic violence in black kinship systems appeared on the political radar. Such interest in extending police "protections" to the black community arose partly in response to the calls for police reform articulated by the Kerner Report. However, as my ethnography reveals, protecting black women from violent intimate partners does not simply turn upon the provision of more effective and proactive community policing services. Rather, the plight of black battered women exists alongside the disadvantaged position of black families in general and the ever weakening position of black men in the global economy. The assault on black kinship systems during the

twentieth-century redemption actually renders black women more rather than less vulnerable to intimate violence.

Marcie, a black victim of domestic violence, told me it was difficult to report her abuser. After attending a domestic call at Marcie's home, a detective and I dropped her off at a friend's house in the Edgehill projects on a Saturday night around midnight. Marcie told us she wanted to go in quickly because people might label her a "snitch." Any association between a black battered woman and the police, including turning in a man who beats her, risks housing project residents' applying such labels. The battered woman is more vulnerable still if her abuser sells drugs or engages in street crime. As Marcie walked to her friend's house, a half dozen young black men stood within a few feet openly selling drugs in an Edgehill parking lot. They scrutinized the detective and me closely. We also drew stares from a group of five or six people standing in the front yard of a crack house. At that time of night in Edgehill our unmarked and rather run-down police vehicle did not provide us with what I perceived to be adequate protection. My fear was palpable, and I was glad to leave the scene. I could not help wondering how Marcie and others lived under such conditions.

Bessie talked of how black women feel compromised reporting black batterers because in so doing they must become accusers. These black battered women worry that in identifying their abusers to police they might perpetuate stereotypes of black men as "violent." Bessie believes that the women's movement neglects black battered women and is unable to see how its emphasis on the empowerment of individual women does not take into account black women's concern with the black community as a whole:

What we have learned is that it's anger about a lot of things. Not just him beating her. It's anger about what she doesn't have access to. It's anger about not having an education. It's anger about not having money. It's anger about not being able to take care of her children. It's anger about the stigmas, the stereotypes, and the system. It's anger about her own situation but also anger about his situation. The inner conflict about "I have to report him and he's a black man. When I report him, what does that do to him? Then I become part of the system." The whole issue of the disproportionate number of black men that are in prison. And the whole black man plight—just dealing
with that, is tough. It’s tough. Very tough. So when sisters come to our program, we are very respectful of them just for having courage to pick up the phone. You see what I’m saying? She becomes part of the accuser. And that’s a lot to deal with.\(^5\) But at the same time, as a victim, I’ve got to make myself safe. So it’s a lot of emotions and a lot of feelings in there. And in terms of fighting back, they say we fight back more, and sometimes I really don’t buy that because of our spirituality or our religiosity. And when you’re part of a religion that says to you, “Forgive and forget,” there’s a part of you that you’re denying, and that’s the anger. And it takes that last hit. Then you say, “I can’t do this anymore.” Everybody reaches a place when they say, “No more.”

Some battered black women talked of their need to have a father figure to help their sons negotiate masculinity and the streets.\(^6\) These women talked of putting up with domestic violence so that abusers might help their sons survive the dangerous world of the housing projects. Living in safer neighborhoods, although not necessarily safer homes, white women did not face the same kind of trade-off.

During my ethnographic research in Florida and Nashville, a number of black women told me that they see battering as more of a white woman’s problem that they, as black women, would not put up with. Alison, a black battered woman from Florida who killed her abusive husband, rendered an eloquent statement of this viewpoint: “White girls are gullible. White girls will put up with centuries of abuse. They will not fight back. It is just the way they’ve been brought up. They are very soft. They are taught to be obedient. A lot of white girls even let their kids run all over them. Black women are a little smarter.”\(^7\) If this view that black women will not or should not put up with battering is pervasive, then black battered women may experience considerable shame. Perhaps this shame is of a different form, degree, and intensity from that suffered by more affluent women of European ancestry.

Domestic homicide rates among blacks are higher than those among whites and Latinos.\(^8\) However, some research reveals that this effect falls away dramatically when researchers control for socioeconomic status.\(^9\) Studies of all persuasions suggest higher rates of domestic violence among poor blacks than poor whites. Noel Cazenave and Murray Straus report that at the lowest income levels “black and white respondents . . . have similar rates of severe spousal violence except at the $6,000–$11,999 income level where the rates are notably higher for blacks.”\(^10\) Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) (1998) show black women more vulnerable to nonlethal intimate violence than women of all other races.\(^11\) The disproportionate victimization of black women could be the reason more black women commit domestic homicide. Between 1992 and 1996, 11.7 per 1,000 black women experienced intimate male violence, compared to 8.2 per 1,000 white women. Over the same period, 2.1 per 1,000 black men and 1.4 per 1,000 white men reported intimate female violence.\(^12\) According to official sources, intimate partner homicide declined in the black community at a much faster rate than among other races or ethnic groups.\(^13\) This faster reduction might be attributable to increased policing of black communities, the mass incarceration of young black men, who are no longer available to either kill or be killed; the more efficient provision of medical services that reduce the death rate from things like gunshot wounds during domestic disputes; or the fostering of a social climate more critical of domestic violence, a climate promoted by the anti-domestic violence movement and the growth of shelter for women.

One possible reason black women do not report their own interpersonal victimization or that of their neighbors is that they see too much domestic violence in their communities. Without further detailed ethnography it is difficult to know how deeply embedded this desensitization to domestic violence might be among residents in Nashville’s housing projects. In a public forum in the James A. Cayce public housing projects, a young woman recently reminded Bessie of some people’s complacency toward domestic violence. Bessie explained:

I was out in Cayce Homes about three weeks ago facilitating a discussion on domestic violence. There was a young lady there that challenged me like I had not been challenged before by a teen in I don’t know when. She challenged in that she was so desensitized to a family member who was experiencing domestic violence. It was a lethal situation. She was saying to me, “So what, Bessie, I know exactly what you’re talking about.” I’m up here doing the power-control wheel and talking about
the dynamics, the cycle, doing all that. She says, "I don't care. You can tell me that all you want to but she keeps going back to him and he keeps beating her, so we just leave it alone. We don't do anything about it." So we were going back and forth with one another. I was determined to keep her talking. I wanted to hear that attitude. When I finally presented to her, "What if there were lots of people in the community that feel the way you do about domestic violence and everybody just accepts it?" She said, "That's how it is." And then, right at that moment, I realized how important it is for us to continue to educate in those particular communities because now it's just normal behavior. What that says to me is, if this is normal behavior to a seventeen-, eighteen-, or nineteen-year-old child, the chances of her being a victim... are greater.

However, my conversations with Officer Ron Hawkins, a white officer who worked in Edgehill for two years as community policing took off there, had a more positive view of the willingness of black women to report domestic violence:

Once they found out there were officers at the Edgehill Enterprise Office that were dedicated to making sure that they were safe, they knew they could call us and ask for a specific officer and say, "Listen, he came over again last night. He was beating on my door at three o'clock in the morning, screaming and yelling, cussing me and threatening to kill me." She would know that I have some history with her as far as her past incidents with this boyfriend or husband or whatever. We would say, "Okay, come on over to the office. We will come get you and take you down to get an order of protection," or if the protection order was already there, we would get a warrant for violating that order. They got to the point that they were doing it. And then we would assist them, of course, through the entire process. When they would come into court, we would show up too because we would physically make the arrest or we had some contributing information. Women would come in and say, "Hey, Officer Hawkins." They would come over and sit down next to us and we would tell them what the process was, what was going to happen, this is what we're doing, this is how things are going to happen today in the courtroom process. It made them more comfortable with it. Has it influenced others to call and report domestic violence? I think so. I don't have hard numbers, but I think it has.

In a discussion about the decline in domestic homicides, Detective Bronson offered the following observations, concurring with Officer Hawkins that the rise in community policing has led to an increased call volume on domestics:

Bronson: I know that Vanderbilt’s Medical Center, for instance, is an excellent trauma center. I’ve seen them, the EMTs, say, “They’re not going to make it.” And they would get them to Vanderbilt, and they make it. I think the medical services have had a great impact on reducing homicides. I believe community policing is building more trust. We get a lot more calls a lot quicker. Reporting has definitely gone up. Whereas somebody else would say, “I thought I heard a gunshot next door but I’m not going to call. I don’t want to get involved.”

Westdale: So it’s neighbors reporting as opposed to, say, victims increasingly reporting because of community policing presence? It’s not like you’re getting into the families but...

Bronson: I would say that both have increased.

However, it remains clear from my ethnographic findings in both Nashville and Florida that there are a significant number of women who do not call the police. In Florida, it was among the ranks of these highly entrapped women that the domestic homicides occurred, with either partner killing the other. My ethnography reveals something of how black battered women feel about calling the police, but we need to learn much more. Clearly, as in Florida, a significant portion of people killed in domestic disturbances came from families that have had little contact with the police. Detective Bronson, concurring with my research into domestic homicides in Florida, which showed domestic deaths to be mostly crimes of escalating violence, intimidation, and entrapment of women, said: "Most of the homicides that are related to domestic violence are victims that we have never dealt with. We have had a few that we have dealt with, but a lot of them we never had the first call. You have to wonder if their family ever knew about any of
this violence, and if they did, why didn't they call? People had to know about this after seeing all these injuries; it had to be going on, because the probability of them just shooting or stabbing them to death for the first time is very low. Most likely there is an escalation of bruises or broken bones.”

Battered women also talked of their fear of public space, though some appeared tough and street savvy, and said they did not find their particular projects threatening; those women were in the minority. Battered women’s fear of the social and physical spaces surrounding their homes makes it difficult to get to shelters or attend support group meetings concerning battering or drug-addiction problems. Regina, who works with battered women from the projects in Nashville, explained:

One of the things that we have had to deal with is their level of concern for safety, even in terms of being picked up by a cab to get to our program. The cab driver does not come to that area after a certain... time on certain days. We used to have support group meetings on Friday. If we didn’t call a taxi before twelve noon, the taxi driver would not go into the area. That, to me, said a lot. So if we didn’t call to say “pick up this woman at a certain place that is outside of the housing area,” then we would have to make other arrangements to pick her up. Not only is this woman in danger in her home, but once she steps outside that door, it’s like a war zone that public transportation will not enter. I’m not hearing from women that we are serving from that area that they feel safe because police officers are there on bikes.

Much of what I have referred to above concerns battered women who live in the poorest sections of Nashville, namely the public housing projects. Most of these women are African American. Most are unmarried and do not need to seek formal legal dissolution of their violent relationships. A conversation with two legal advocates for battered women, Henrietta and Germaine, reminded me of the extent to which poverty is a barrier for women who seek to leave their abusers. I had witnessed this phenomenon before in rural Kentucky, where women reported using permanent orders of protection as “makeshift divorces.” It was disconcerting to see a similar drama played out in Nashville, where, in the Latino community especially, there is a strong patriarchal imperative against divorce.

Websdale: I attended a “domestic” the other day where a woman was looking for a divorce and was looking to move out of her relationship, and she was telling me that she managed to find a cheap source of a divorce, which was $375. She said it would normally cost $500 to $700 to pick up a divorce.

Henrietta: That is pretty standard. I mean, that is uncontested divorce with no property and no children. Just a very simple divorce.

Germaine: When you get into a custody battle... I have a friend who left her abusive husband and she spent over $5,000 divorcing him.

Henrietta: Yeah. That’s very discouraging for poor women and children especially. Men always threaten to fight for custody whether they want it or not. So it can be very very expensive. If a woman calls an attorney and says, “I have children and I want a divorce and I think he’s gonna fight for custody,” she will be quoted $1,500 outright.

Websdale: Yeah. I’ve done some research in Kentucky, and there I heard that women would just not get married again. They will just move away and not get divorced because it so difficult, expensive, and time-consuming. Do you see a lot of that?

Germaine: I do. Especially in the community that I work with, the Latino community. There is cultural and religious opposition to divorce to the extent that women will just separate and just never even bother to get a divorce.

Websdale: In a permanent state of separation, if you will, which in itself is somewhat dangerous.

Germaine: It is. It is dangerous. They also limit themselves in terms of what they can actually obtain for things like child support. It becomes very difficult. In the Latino population, we’re not known to just have one or two kids. Many have four or five, so it becomes very difficult to support a family that size. They don’t want to further their state of danger by asking for child support or asking for a divorce. So many don’t even bother with it.

The domestic violence case I initially referred to in my discussion with Germaine and Henrietta warrants careful consideration. Andy
Baron had abused his wife, Nancy, on a number of occasions, was a drunk, and had problems keeping a job and supporting his family. Nancy was in the process of seeking legal advice regarding divorce and making moves to leave him. On a hot and humid afternoon in August, Andy used his vehicle to ram a car containing Nancy, Kirk (Nancy’s brother), and Julie (Kirk’s girlfriend). He had followed them to a back street and engaged in a verbal argument with Nancy, following which he rammed their car. Detective Eastwood and I arrived at the scene of what appeared to be a motor-vehicle accident. A patrol unit was already there talking with those at the scene. On our way to the scene we had passed under a bridge a hundred yards from the accident, situated near a truck stop in Nashville. There was large dent in the side of Nancy’s vehicle and glass all over the road. Kirk told us that if he had not dived back into the vehicle (landing on the backseat) as Andy rammed them, “I would have been killed.” While Detective Eastwood talked with Nancy, I chatted at length with Kirk. I asked him if he had engaged in a physical altercation with Andy that afternoon, to which he replied, “No, he knows better than that, I’d have kicked his butt.” At one point Nancy told me that she had located a source for a cheap divorce who charged only $375.

Andy had driven away from the scene in his own car. A security guard from the nearby truck stop witnessed the confrontation and took off in pursuit of Andy. At one point Andy stopped his vehicle, drew a gun, and fired several shots at the security officer, who then gave up the chase. Eastwood and I learned of this shooting over the police radio. Eastwood directed the patrol officer at the scene to interview the security officer, who had returned to the relative tranquility of the truck stop. I spent the next four hours or so with Nancy, Kirk, Julie, and other family members as Eastwood processed this case through the Domestic Violence Unit (DVU) of the Nashville Police Department, the Nashville night court, the emergency room, and the jail.

At the DVU Detective Eastwood filed four charges of aggravated assault against Andy, who, earlier that day, had also attempted to run down one of his own children. I thought to myself that Andy was not that good behind the wheel of a car, or that he was playing some kind of sinister game. We then proceeded to transport Nancy and Julie to night court to put these cases to the commissioner; Kirk followed in another vehicle. By the time we arrived at night court, it was dark. I glanced around to check out the scene, knowing that this is not always the most salubrious of places. There were twenty or so people milling around, some in tattered clothes, some in suits and nice dresses [attorneys?]. As I continued the surveillance work of the weary and, by now, weary ethnographer, Detective Eastwood’s radio blurted out a message: “Do you know of an Andy Baron who is now under medical treatment at the ER after receiving two gunshot wounds?” Eastwood wondered if there was any confusion over the name (Baron is a pseudonym for a very common last name), so he checked in with the dispatcher. Nancy was by now distraught in the back of the police vehicle. Julie was helping to calm her down. The dispatcher then confirmed that it was the Andy Baron who had reportedly rammed Nancy, Julie, and Kirk hours earlier and shot at the security guard who had pursued him. As if this was not bad enough, the tension built to fever pitch as the dispatcher told Eastwood that one of the nurses at the ER had described Andy Baron’s injuries as serious and life-threatening. Nancy began to wail and throw herself around in the back of the police car, saying that Andy is the father of her three children, and that although he is an “asshole at times,” she did not want to see Andy die. We slowly helped Nancy into one of the interview rooms at night court amid those charged with DUI, prostitution, and other offenses.

The patrol officer from the scene joined us. The situation had now changed significantly, because the patrol officer and the detective were not sure if Andy had shot himself or if Nancy had somehow shot him; the police learned that Andy had told the admitting medical personnel that his wife shot him (we heard then he had two gunshot wounds to the abdomen). The patrol officer entered the interview room, where Nancy was still sobbing. He told her to calm down and then asked her if she had erased any of the harassing calls she claimed Andy had made to her earlier that day threatening to hurt himself if she left him. She answered no, telling the officer that the calls were still on the answering machine. The officer, in a very serious tone, told Nancy, “Don’t erase those messages; we’ll need them as evidence.” The patrol officer glanced at me, and we both knew why he needed them; so did Kirk, Julie, and Nancy, all of whom were now paying close attention.

The patrol officer disappeared, leaving me in the interview room with Julie, Nancy, and Kirk. Julie opened a container of pills. As natural as can be, Julie handed Nancy a tablet of Valium from her personal stash, saying, “That should calm you down.” Having just witnessed a federal narcotics offense, I smiled rather wickedly to myself: the federal
government was paying me as a consultant to work on this project. Being familiar with the effects of Valium, I knew that in approximately thirty minutes Nancy would relax significantly. Indeed, I sensed I had just experienced a rare and transcendent moment of “ethnographic empathy.”

The police located Andy’s vehicle, and Eastwood and I traveled to examine it. The crime scene analyst found no blood or gun, but did find a large knife under the driver’s seat and a collection of empty beer cans. It seems Andy had gotten a ride from where he dumped the van to somewhere close to the hospital. We then visited the ER, where we learned the truth about Andy’s medical status. He had two superficial gunshot wounds, seemingly caused by his pinching folds of fat on his stomach and shooting through them. Eastwood and I looked at each other and headed back to night court. By the time we arrived, the patrol officer had listened to Andy’s recorded threats to take his own life if Nancy left him.

Behind a thick shield of bulletproof glass and looking down on the courtroom, the commissioner signed out the warrants to pick up Andy. I broke away from the group as we left night court to visit the restroom to urinate. This was clearly a mistake, and if I had not been with a police officer I would probably have been better off finding somewhere quiet at the back of the building to relieve myself. As I left a small, dirty room, that was liberally blessed with a mixture of vomit and fecal material, I ran into Kirk, who took me to one side. I had become quite fond of Kirk as the evening wore on. Indeed, I wondered to myself at the time, somewhat cynically, if this was the kind of male bonding the middle-class men’s movement was bleating about. He said he was happy that things worked out right and that his sister was getting justice. It had been clear to Kirk all along that Andy was a game-playing manipulator who had shot himself to get attention. Perhaps at last his sister would see the light and move beyond “this loser.” Kirk went on to say that he was due at work in the morning, it was late, and he wanted to get home. I asked what kind of work he did. He told me he delivered flowers and that his boss was already considering him for promotion. According to Kirk, the other drivers were not as quick or reliable as he was. He had been on the job only a month. He then made a strange face and said, “You know, I’m sorry I won’t be delivering flowers to Andy at the morgue tomorrow.” We smiled and shook hands. People discuss death easily and lightly on the streets.

Police arrested Andy a little while after he left the hospital. We got a call that we needed to book him into jail. As I left the court building and headed toward the jail, I wondered if it was the same jail where police used to beat black men in the elevator. I quickly reminded myself that it was not, that things had doubtless improved in Nashville, and felt a little easier as I rode up the elevator with Eastwood into the booking area. I mentioned the state of the restrooms at the night court to Eastwood, and he looked at me as police sometimes do at academics and said something like, “What do you expect with the prostitutes who work the area, the homeless men, and the drug addicts who sleep in there at all hours?” I reflected on the $375 that Nancy said would pay for her divorce, assuming, as Germane and Henrietta had reminded me, the divorce was straightforward. Eastwood and I went on to the next call.

Violent and Manipulative Black Women?

bell hooks traces the stereotypical image of young black women as “sapphires,” or “evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful,” back to the ideologies of slavery. Ideas that young women of color have become increasingly violent seem to derive more from the misogynist tendencies of the media rather than from a careful consideration of the empirical evidence on girls’ and women’s uses of violence. As noted earlier, there is no debate about the disproportionate involvement of black women in violent acts such as domestic homicide. Neither is there any doubt about the rage existing among some black women over their miserable social conditions. What is missing from much of the media coverage of black women’s crime is its political and historical underpinnings and its meaning to the perpetrators themselves. When viewed in these ways, what may appear to be reprehensible violence or manipulative behavior turns out to be largely a survival mechanism. In talking about the involvement of some black women in drug dealing and other forms of crime, Bessie commented: “It’s a survival mechanism... because of the oppression. If you look at some of those guys and some of the female victims themselves they just want more. You gotta eat, you got to have somewhere to sleep, and you got babies to feed.”

However, some police officers told me that they perceived some women to be using the domestic violence laws to manipulate more
money out of the drug dealers with whom they were involved. Officer Barry Maul thought that a small number of women from the Edgehill projects sometimes manipulated the domestic violence laws to their own advantage. He noted women's increased willingness to call the Edgehill Community Policing substation once they heard officers would be more responsive:

When they became aware that there were people that actually would say, "Okay, we'll listen to what you have to say and we will help you," when they became aware of that, they didn't hesitate to pick up that phone. We had a problem with them calling our substation office instead of calling 911. They were calling our office over here for emergencies and that would of course slow down our response time. Once they learned the laws were there to protect them, we had some manipulation of the DV laws right off the bat. Tennessee has very strict domestic violence laws concerning if there are any signs of injury. We have to make an arrest, according to state law. They've taken the discretion away from the officer. Women became comfortable enough that they would call us and say, "Hey, this has happened..." The guys supported lots of girlfriends over here. The girlfriends would let [them] hide in their places, store drugs in their places, store guns in their places, but we would run into the domestic violence. A few of the women would say to the men, "Give me a couple hundred dollars cause I want to go to the club tonight." The drug dealer would say no. And the girl would go call 911, "Hey, he just beat me up. I want to get a warrant on him." The drug dealer would laugh as we were taking him to jail. They're going, like, "She ain't coming to court. I'll give her a few hundred bucks when I get out of here and she won't come to court." And she wouldn't show up in court to prosecute the domestic allegations.

I found no expression of this viewpoint among others with whom I talked. It seems likely that cases where women manipulate drug dealers like this are rare. It may be that Officer Maul was buying into the views of drug dealers who battered women rather than identifying any major trend in the policing of domestic disturbances in the projects. It seems unlikely to me, given the violence meted out by some dealers,

that any more than a handful of women would try this kind of blackmail.

The links between battered women and drug dealers are much more pronounced among African American communities in the housing projects than they are elsewhere. Hispanic women I talked with from poor neighborhoods told me that authorities jailed them for their use of self-defense. Germane, who has considerable experience working with battered Hispanic women, summarized these problems: "We do have a lot of women who assault their offenders or get charged with it. It's so bogus. I've had a couple of my Latino clients who actually ended up in jail because they have assaulted their husbands, and when I speak to them, I'm like, 'Why were you arrested?' And it was because the police asked, 'Did you hit him?' and they said, 'Yes, I did.' But then the police don't get the whole story. Who was hit first? Patrol officers should be identifying the primary aggressor and asking those questions, but they are not."

In nearly all cases in which Latinas used defensive violence, police later dropped the charges. However, those women still have to go through the degradation of admission to the jail, loss of contact with their children, and attempting to make bond. Many of Germane's clients are not able to make bond, so they stay in jail until their hearings. This vulnerability to the degradation of jail stems directly from the poverty of these women and the tendency of some police to see women as violent and potentially manipulative. I do not mean to imply that women never initiate violence against men in interpersonal relationships, or that women cannot be primary aggressors in those relationships. However, it is unwise to use the word "battering" to describe these episodes of female violence. I concur with Ann Goetting, who reserves the word "battering" for "an obsessive campaign of coercion and intimidation designed by a man to dominate and control a woman, which occurs in the personal context of intimacy and thrives in the sociopolitical climate of patriarchy." 

Black Men, Battering, and the Housing Projects

In chapter 3 I discussed research showing that young black men are more likely to commit "violent" crimes than their Caucasian peers, especially offenses the general public fears, such as robbery and murder. It is an understatement to say this tendency contributes to the demon-
ization of black men. Black men are overrepresented among perpetrators of domestic violence and domestic homicide, just as black women are overrepresented as victims of these offenses. Are black men biologically programmed to commit violent crime? No. Otherwise we would see much more crime in all-black communities, especially those communities where blacks enjoy a higher standard of living than they do in the housing projects of Nashville. Were biological explanations valid, we would also expect to see much higher rates of violent crime such as homicide in other countries with high black populations, and we do not.21

My focus is on domestic violence among the poor, those typically subjected to the most intense forms of community policing. I asked myself, “What do the black men who live in some of Nashville’s public housing projects think about domestic violence and gender relations in today’s society?”22 In particular, I was keen to explore how our explanatory models, such as the power-control wheel designed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, Minnesota, might apply to black batterers. Interviews with European American battered women formed the basis for the construction of this wheel. The power-control wheel explains domestic violence as a means for men to control women and to exercise their power over them. It emphasizes men’s use of coercion (including violence) and threats; intimidation (through looks, gestures, actions); emotional abuse (put downs and so on); isolation (stringent surveillance and regulation of what a woman does, who she sees, and so on); minimization and denial (making light of violence); the children as a tool to control the woman (e.g., threatening to take them away); male privilege (regarding decision making, being the master of the household, treating the woman as a subordinate); and economic abuse (preventing her from accessing or knowing about family income, making her ask for money, giving her an allowance).

We need to reconstruct this power-control wheel in the case of African American battered women. At some level, the domestic violence of black men parallels that of white men; they use similar techniques, similar forms of coercion, threat, and intimidation. However, we must ask, Can the black perpetrator of domestic violence engage in the same strategies of isolation and resort to the same forms of detailed surveillance of black women as European American men might? Black perpetrators I talked with typically did not live regularly with their intimate female partners. Many were themselves under the close scru-
Latinos, European Americans, and Asians? Put differently, does the compromised societal position of black men in a global economy promote their resorting to more-violent forms of patriarchal regulation in their intimate relationships with women?22 These are important questions that warrant close attention. My entree into these matters is through conversations with people on the street, in their homes, and in various institutional settings.

In a conversation I had with Henry Oliver, a black man in his early twenties, the deeply compromised entitlements of black men vis-à-vis black women appeared embedded in a much wider set of social relations whereby many black people, men and women, feel they are not really "free." For some black men, being free may include the right to use violence to enforce patriarchal privileges. Henry had considerable experience with the police and criminal justice system in Nashville, and our conversation took place while he was on probation for a domestic violence offense. According to Henry, he showed his girlfriend after she had assaulted him because he turned up late with some groceries and provisions for their children. The couple was living apart at the time of the offense. Henry was arrested. His girlfriend remained at home in the public housing projects with their children. I did not speak with her.

One of Henry's principal concerns was with what he saw as the frantic status competition between men in the projects over every conceivable issue, including sexual access to women. For Henry, going to jail left him to wonder who might be hitting on his intimate partner.

Henry: ... and my kids, and my lady gonna get with somebody else ... the next dealer? Or whoever? That's the man's worst fear in the projects, lady bein' with somebody else. ... You hurtin', you can't get out of jail ... you life still seem like it's fucked up, because, you know, you always bein' watched.

Websdale: Is that one of the roots of tension between black men in the projects? You know, going to jail, coming back, wondering what's going on, competition between men, between dealers?

Henry: The men ... 'cause like I said, man, everybody's for 'emselves in the projects. That's why it's the way it is in the projects. Everybody's for 'imself and tryin' to make so much money ... In the projects it's just totally different. I mean, in the projects, it's who's the man, who has the shit, who has the most shit and wants to have so much shit to get out, you know, and you don't know when it's enough, when to stop—it's never enough. Money ain't never enough, you know, regardless, I don't care, you can have a normal job and money's never enough 'cause you always need money to spend. ... Henry made it clear to me that he disapproved of men beating up their partners. "It need to be equal between men an' women, you know, I'm not against that. If you have some crazy guy that just beat these women ... that's wrong, and I'm all for Metro to step in an' do their job. I don't like seein' no woman get beat ..." Henry noted how "wicked and evil" some black women can be if men decide to exercise their male privilege and move on.

You have arguments, an' damn, some women can be wicked and evil and call Metro 'cause it seems like you wanna move on and be with somebody else. They do it out of spite and ... Metro's not stupid—they oughtta see that other side of it too. Why come up here an' arrest me? I was arrested you know, and my, my kids seein' me bein' arrested, it's like, "Damn, do you even care, don't you got kids, how would you feel? ... Only thing you doin' you doin' you're job, which you feel like you gotta do, and that's putting me in cuffs, shit, you're not even listenin." ... This woman got a little control of my fuckin' life and now, you know, the male is even more angry because he, like I say, "Damn, I'm not even livin' free ..." I'm not even livin' free.

The collective exposure of young black men to the criminal justice system has sensitized them deeply to being incarcerated for domestic violence. In my conversation with several black batterers, this manifested as a thinly disguised anger toward their partners for calling the police on them. Of course, black women know of the oppression and discrimination meted out by the criminal justice juggernaut. These women often delay calling police until the violence escalates to near-lethal levels. Again, this may be another reason why we see higher levels of domestic homicide among African Americans. This sensitization might be all the greater if the man perceives he has done no wrong and thinks he is being manipulated. Regardless of the facts of
domestic cases, clearly men like Henry think about their plight and their lack of freedom, weighing it carefully against their love for their children and their deeply compromised needs to be fathers and providers. There are a number of paradoxes in Henry’s words, and perhaps some implied threats about how he or other [hypothetical] incarcerated black men might get even with “their” women from behind bars:

*Henry:* I don’t want to go to jail. I’m just tryin’ to live. I love my boys dearly, man, an’ it’s like, I got to meet her on her terms. When I got out of jail, my probation officer sayin’, “Just stay away from her…” And I don’t want her to cry wolf again... I can’t see my kids till they fuckin’ grow up, you know, and then if I come over it’s like on her terms, you know. I’m so angry. I’m feelin’ like a monster now, I feel like a monster because... you know, once I’m in jail, it changes the male image... with the woman, the relationship, and, especially, if you got the kids, man... I’m talkin’ ‘bout the guys that do love their kids, wanna dress ‘em like them, they love that type shit, man, you know, just keep their hair neat, and they just want the best for ‘em, man, just give ‘em all the shit that they never used to have. But once you go to jail, man, I’m tellin’ you, then you get back with the woman, sometimes it might just be ‘cause the male do right by her now. Some men can be doin’ this. Others got a plan, they just wanna stay with her, lay over with her for a while, kiss her ass, do whatever... He mad, you know, inside, but, you know, he got a plan....

Yeah, and then you got these guys puttin’ hits out on these girls, you know, have somebody else come around, “Hell, if I can’t do it, I’m a have somebody come and just catch ya out one night, fuck ya up, beat you up,’cause they feel like they can get away with it. Nine times outta ten they can get away with it at night. You can play the role like, “Damn baby, what happened?” you know like, “What happened?” But you really had her fucked up... *Websdale:* So you’re saying that guys would actually hire somebody... *Henry:*... to fuck her up... Then you know they victims... even if they ain’t with ‘em no more... hire ‘em to fuck ‘em up.

... You gotta pay child support and they wanna go downtown, just to keep draggin’ you through the system. A black man hates gettin’ dragged through the system. You can be in jail and have motherfuckers from the outside work for you.

... So what makes you safe? ’Cause he behind bars?

Henry is clear about his frustration with the criminal justice system, his lack of freedom, and the fact that it is possible to exact revenge on women from behind the bars of a jail cell. He expresses deep dissatisfaction with his lot in life, not only his inability to see his children on his terms, but also his seeming inability to provide for them economically. A number of black men told me that once the criminal justice juggernaut labeled them a “criminal” or “ex-felon,” it was more difficult for them to find and keep regular paid work. If the criminal justice juggernaut’s close regulation of black men makes them more likely to use violence against their intimate female partners, then such close regulation constitutes yet another assault on the black family and contemporary black kinship systems.

It is not my suggestion that black men use violence to control women just because they have been oppressed by slavery and its many ugly legacies.25 If this were the case, we would expect to see many more black domestic violence offenders. Neither do I want to run the risk of excusing black men’s violence against women by framing it as a displacement or expression of their hostility toward the criminal justice system or other oppressive social arrangements. What I hope I have raised is the possibility that black men who exert power and control over women through violence have fewer manipulative, surveillance-based tactics at their disposal and, as a result, may resort to more-overt acts of violence and intimidation than their better-off peers of European ancestry. If it is the case that some black men are compelled by broader social forces to employ more violence and direct coercion to control their intimate partners, then I suggest that this patriarchal compulsion has been amplified during the twentieth-century redemption by the rise of the criminal justice juggernaut.

Policing, Battering, and Poverty

During the 1990s the city of Nashville supposedly became a national leader in the fight against domestic violence. In spring 1994 Mayor Bredesen led a $1.08-million initiative against family violence, creating the Domestic Violence Unit (DVU) at the Nashville Police Department, adding more prosecutors and probation officers to the criminal justice system, and increasing services and assistance for victims. The institutional changes accompanied legislative developments that sought to strengthen laws against perpetrators of domestic violence. These new laws began to take effect on July 1, 1995, and in
cluded a simplification of Tennessee's stalking law that made it easier for police to press charges and for prosecutors to convict,22 the adoption of a preferred arrest policy for police, encouraging them to arrest primary aggressors; the establishment of a domestic violence coordinating council to provide education and training to police and judicial agencies across the state; and provision for magistrates to impose conditions of release or bail upon defendants to protect alleged victims.

From its inception the Nashville DVU was the largest of its kind in the nation, with thirty-four specially trained investigators. Before the formation of the DVU, one detective followed up on the approximately eighteen thousand cases a year. This meant that only patrol officers handled the domestic cases, with the Homicide Unit handling the killings. Domestic violence homicides decreased significantly after the formation of the DVU.23 Each year from 1990 to 1993, police recorded roughly twenty-five domestic homicides. In 1994 and 1995, annual reports reveal fifteen and twelve killings, respectively.24 During the 1990s the Nashville Police Department pulled in millions of dollars in federal funds to augment the DVU initiatives. On a visit to Nashville in July 1996, Attorney General Reno made a point of praising the DVU and the way it works with the courts and prosecutors.25 Not unexpectedly, as the DVU grew, so too did the number of domestic violence calls it handled.26 Similarly, the number of protection orders issued against batterers increased from 700 in 1993 to 3,500 in 1995. The courts developed special dockets to handle domestic cases, and the jail developed a batterer's treatment program. Clearly, these developments translated into real criminal justice system protections for at least some battered women. Among the battered women I talked with, many spoke much more highly of DVU officers than they did of either regular patrol officers or more-specialized community police officers. For victims of domestic violence, the DVU officer is more likely to understand the dynamics of abusive relationships and less likely to accept or buy into the manipulative or minimizing behavior of violent men. Likewise, DVU officers are more knowledgeable about the services available to battered women. In certain cases with a perceived high risk of lethality, DVU officers engaged in what they called "stalking the stalker." Such policing included maintaining a close surveillance on batterers who stalked their victims, putting a trace on their phones, videotaping them, and working with the victim's employer to ensure workplace safety. Rudy Smith, director of the Madison domestic vio-

lence program in Nashville, explained, "For us, it's the difference between daylight and dark . . . The change in procedures and attitudes have made a difficult situation for victims easier than it once was."27

The rise of the Nashville DVU as a national model happened during a period when violence against women became a hot issue in party politics. The passage of the Violence Against Women Act (1994), the establishment of the Violence Against Women Office in Washington, and the increased flow of federal funds to the states are all part of the broader contextual frame within which the Nashville DVU emerged. It was no small achievement for the DVU to rise to prominence as it did. Some of its fame derives from the work of individual officers at the Nashville DVU. Sergeant and, later, Lieutenant Mark Wynn's acknowledged expertise in the area contributed much to the unit's reputation and sterling work. However, amidst the hoopla and accolades, at the time of this writing the Nashville DVU is in disarray. Mark Wynn resigned because of political infighting; the long-term captain of the DVU, Shirley Davis, moved to another department; a recent $500,000 COPS grant awaits completion; and women of color in the housing projects continue to complain about their compromised plight as victims of domestic violence.28

Undoubtedly, the Nashville DVU does a lot of good work on behalf of victims of domestic violence and has probably saved the lives of a number of women. However, the stories of individual battered women and others remind us that battering is not primarily a criminal justice problem; it is a social problem. The presence or absence of police will typically not deter interpersonal victimization behind the closed doors of the family home. Domestic violence is socially patterned and patriarchally generated, and there are sharp limits on what the criminal justice system can do to prevent it.29 Battered women and their advocates told me of marked improvements in services for victims of domestic violence. Doubtless, the establishment of the DVU and the use of advocates to train criminal justice professionals contributed these improvements. Angie, an advocate for battered women, said: "When I look back over the time period . . . yes, I have seen changes in how police respond to domestic violence. We have done a lot of training with the police department in terms of social service programs, shelter programs to help police officers understand the dynamics, because maybe seven or eight years ago the general attitude was, 'Oh, it's just another damn domestic . . . .'"
However, battered women and their advocates alike noted definite limits on the nature of that change. None of the women felt that community policing had or would make much difference to battered women. I asked Bessie if any of the women she worked with had reported a difference. She told me: “I’m not hearing from women that we are serving in Edgehill comment about feeling safe because police officers on bikes are there. I don’t think victims of crime feel that the system has been improved because you place three, four, or five more police officers. The territory is so large and the issues are huge. You can have a police officer on the west side of the project, but what about the east side? Just because a police officer is outside her home, in the community, doesn’t mean that it increases her safety level inside her home. There is a whole lot more change that is required to make victims of crime feel safe than to have a few more police officers available in the community.”

Saturation community policing may not make black women feel safer, because those women have a deep suspicion of police. Andrea, who works with battered women in Nashville, told me that community memories of racial oppression died hard. The media coverage of the police’s brutal treatment of blacks reenergizes these memories. “And you think of black families that have grown up here and what they have experienced, and that history gets shared. And so again, that fear and distrust will get shared. That still permeates,” said Andrea. Bessie told me what the women at the prison told her, she could not, as a black woman, assume that police officers were going to protect her:

I have had situations where I’ve walked right out of my office into a drug bust. I have had situations where I’m going to my office and I’m stopped by the police and had fear of the police. When I’m interacting with a police officer, I cannot assume that the police officer understands my experience. I cannot assume that the police officer is there to protect me. And that is the experience of the residents of those project areas. You got a lot of things that you’re dealing with there. For example, we approach this issue of domestic violence along with everything that is going in the world. Racism, the huge problem of the importing of drugs, drug culture—that it is a business, that it is a way to make a living, and that some of these women are victims of that. So to just say that the presence of police officers has improved her safety—we can’t make that blanket statement.

Some women at least implied that more saturation community policing might benefit women in the projects. Samantha, a battered black woman I met at an East Nashville support group, differentiated between the performance of the DVU and regular patrol. She then went on to say that round-the-clock intensive police presence combined with a detailed knowledge of domestic violence might have more of an impact than current community policing efforts.

Websdale: So the rise of community policing in the last three or four years really hasn’t made that much difference to domestic violence? Maybe the DV Unit has made a difference?
Samantha: Yeah, but not the regular policing.
Websdale: Regular community policing?
Samantha: No, they need to be more educated. And if they’re going to do it, do it twenty-four-seven, not just have it during the daytime when everybody is at work and everything is calm. But then at nighttime, and you call and they come out and they’re acting nasty because they’re coming into a low-income area, and the woman might be high, ya know, whatever, that woman is trying to get away from her pain for some reason or this man has gotten her strung out.

Indeed, research shows that many women victimized by violence often medicate their pain with drugs and alcohol. Indeed, many women who use domestic violence shelters have substance abuse problems. To this group we can add a significant number of women who enter personal relationships with male drug users, addicts, or dealers. If he supplies her with drugs and he later begins to batter her, she must choose between her addiction and her victimization. According to some DVU officers I talked with who worked with women in these situations, women’s addictions far outweighed their fear of occasional battery. Officer Peter Simon was one such DVU detective: “I know that we have had several battered women where the men were providing drugs for them. That was one of the things that was keeping her there. Cutting that drug link for them is not a choice. She would rather take
the beating than give up the drugs. It seems that the women I have dealt with more or less knew that they were dealers in the beginning. They were not really afraid of them then, but they have had a problem with them and have become afraid of them.”

Bessie saw a number of younger black women intimately involved with gang members or drug dealers. She feared for their safety and worried that their abusers would force them to use lethal defensive violence. Note how Bessie’s words on the retributive powers of gang members and drug dealers echo those of Henry Oliver:

One of the groups that I’m real concerned with is the age group of fifteen-plus through age twenty-five to thirty. Many of these younger women are in relationships with violent men who are gang members or drug dealers. Their sense of safety is definitely low, not only because of the violence they are exposed to in the relationship, but the violence that they are more likely to experience if they try to leave the relationship. If he doesn’t harm her, somebody else will. So she’s trapped. So when you think of a person who is trapped and they are in an environment where there’s violence or drugs, they’re going to fight back. They’re trying to save themselves. I think most of the time black women are trying to defend ourselves; if it’s not physically, it’s socially. It’s one way or the other being on the defense.

And again, with that stigma and stereotype of “an angry black woman.” Who can live under that? Who can survive that?

Relationships with men who work in the subterranean economy can end up backfiring on women if authorities know of the illicit association. In March 1996, President Clinton signed the Housing Opportunity Program Extension Act, an initiative designed to combat crime in public housing. Drug dealers, gang members, and so-called violent criminals were the principal target of the legislation. Building on the Cranston-Gonzalez National Affordable Housing Act of 1990, which permitted housing authorities to evict tenants for criminal activity, President Clinton made what became known as “One Strike and You’re Out” official policy. Clinton’s move allowed authorities to better scrutinize applicants and tenants for past and present criminal activity and to evict tenants whose actions on or off public housing premises threatens the safety or well-being of other residents. The housing authorities did not have to rely upon an arrest or conviction to prove the disruptive behavior of problem tenants. Neither did the offender have to be the person whose name appeared on the lease. “One Strike” holds the entire household responsible for the behavior of individuals or their associates. As President Clinton put it, “I challenge local housing authorities and tenant associations: Criminal gang members and drug dealers are destroying the lives of decent tenants. From now on, the rule for residents who commit crime and peddle drugs should be one strike and you’re out.”

The problem is that a battered woman whose name appears on the lease as a public housing tenant is subject to eviction if she cannot “control” the behavior of her abusive partner. As Claire Renzetti puts it, “One especially insidious aspect of One Strike with respect to battered women is the inherent assumption that the abuser is a person under the woman’s control, when domestic violence research consistently shows the opposite to be the case.”

The battered woman in public housing may not call police, take out a restraining order, or otherwise report abuse because she fears eviction. Likewise, she may hesitate to report her abuser’s criminal behavior (e.g., drug dealing) not only because she fears retribution from him or because she relies on that criminal activity to feed her children, but also because she fears that the police attention will result in her eviction or limit her ability to apply for public housing in the future. As I heard from women in Nashville, some batterers coerce their victims into criminal activity, such as writing bad checks, selling drugs, storing weapons, driving getaway vehicles, and so on. If she attempts to leave him by applying for tenancy in public housing, it is possible that her involvement in those criminal activities will present grounds for housing authorities to deny her application.

As we saw in chapter 2, a number of female housing project residents make perfectly rational choices about how to survive given the economic exigencies of their lives. If authorities catch women with offenders in and around their homes, or if women receive frequent visits from police, authorities might evict them. According to Officer Simon, “I know that there have been several cases where the patrol officers have told us that if the guy comes back, she will be evicted. Women know that if they are linked to any kind of criminal activity, particularly drugs, they can pretty much be put out of the house.”

Germane’s understanding of the eviction of battered women from public housing for their association with either criminals or the crim-
inal justice system is similar to Detective Simon's. Germaine goes further and warns us of yet another compromise faced by battered women who have to weigh possible eviction against calling the police if their abuser breaches an order of protection. In Germaine's words we again see the complex intersection of poverty and safety issues for battered women, particularly those of color, who disproportionately inhabit the lower echelons of the Nashville housing market.

Germaine: A lot of women lost housing in the community and in different housing projects because of the number of police cars coming to their house. The housing authority think they are troublemakers and they lose their housing. These are police cars for their own protection from domestic violence. These women are skeptical about the orders of protection anyway because when abusers come around, the women can call the police; but after so many calls, they can be evicted because they are seen as causing a problem.

Websdale: Regardless of the nature of the call?
Germaine: Regardless of you being the one who is assaulted and the man has been told by police to leave the place.

My conversation with Ramona at the Tennessee prison was also consistent with Germaine's observations about the compromises faced by battered women. She noted, "If anyone in your house is caught in your house sellin' drugs then you get evicted."

Bessie acknowledged that many black women negotiate compromising relationships with black men. Given the combination of public housing rules that do not allow live-in men and the constant harassment of black men by the police, black women engage in intimate relationships cautiously and surreptitiously. This subterranean trafficking in intimacy in the public housing projects is reminiscent of the way some slaves used to arrange to see their intimate partners who lived on different plantations. As Gutman notes, "Such visits between kin with separate owners—and especially husbands and fathers separated from their wives and children—regularly dot the historical record documenting slave behavior... Ethan Allen Andrews learned that drunken young white men chastised an Upper South slave husband whom they found in bed with his wife and without a pass." Of course, many slaves also made these visits with passes, and some owners actively encouraged intimate relationships between slaves from different plantations. Bessie summarized the tense way in which the social con-

ditions within the housing projects compromised intimate relationships among blacks:

When you're dealing with that particular community, housing projects and welfare, there is a mentality. There is an expectation. There is a code that people live by, and you're not going to see many men visible because the women know they are not supposed to have men living there with them. One of the ways to supplement their lifestyle is to have a man available to them for finances or just because it is normal to have a mate. They have to compromise how they experience that because the man is not supposed to be there. That is just understood. To get into housing projects, you have to meet a certain index of eligibility, not only financial eligibility. There is a way to get the man there... You are not going to see men. The visibility is going to be low until the evening.

The women I spoke to at the prison said that domestic violence was often hidden from police:

Beth: Community policing is only gonna affect outer appearances on the streets. Domestic violence is hidden a lot more.
Tabatha: Community policing doesn't really exist, and even if it did, you'd have the same officers on bikes and they're still going to have the same attitude! The attitude hasn't changed any, and that's the thing that I'm looking at. It's not so much the response time because I don't think that's it.

At the other end of the criminal justice conveyer belt, Officer Steve Samson, who worked the drug trade undercover for a number of years, concurred. Now, as a detective with the DVU, he told me, "I'll be honest; my personal experience is that community policing has very little, almost nothing, to do with domestic violence."

Most battered women seemed to agree that the life circumstances of poor women dictated how they escaped their interpersonal victimization. In other words, policing is a peripheral rather than a central concern. Brenda, another prisoner, explained the problem succinctly:

Here's what I think the big problem is. With women and children, they can't leave 'cause they pay day care and their job
doesn't pay enough money for them to pay rent and take care of their families. They can't count on the perpetrator to be paying child support; the odds are that he's not gonna pay it. Nashville needs some transitional housing for victims of domestic violence. They have all this transitional housing for drug addicts and alcoholics, but I think the psychological effects on victims are so great that it does affect how they work in their jobs and how they function in society. They've been abused for so long. These women can go to shelter and get services, but can they take care of themselves after they have to leave the shelter? You know, a majority go back to their abuser because of the financial strain, and I think that problem has to be addressed here in Nashville.

Policing Black Kin

I opened this chapter with two stories of black women incarcerated for defending themselves against their violent intimate partners. Latinas and Caucasian women use much less preemptive, resistive, and defensive lethal violence. The reasons for the resort to homicide remain unclear, although the imprisonment of black women for offenses such as these suggest that the criminal justice system has determined for itself the root of these crimes: the illegal use of violence with the intent to kill or seriously injure.

To sum up, then, many black women in the projects find it difficult to speak about domestic violence. The reasons for this include a desire to preserve the privacy and sanctity of black kinship systems, a historical tendency dating back to slavery; women’s involvement in criminal activities; religious pressures from the church to forgive and forget; mistrust of the criminal justice system, housing authorities, the welfare system, and other state agencies; seeing the reporting of abusers as a form of cultural/racial disloyalty or betrayal; and women being inured to violence because of its prevalence in their homes and on the streets surrounding their homes. Once again I emphasize the social and historical forces that compromise the personal safety of black battered women and the integrity of black kinship systems, including community policing. The regular patrol of black neighborhoods by police dates to the period after the twentieth-century reconstruction and particularly after the Kerner Report recommendations. The emergence of community policing initiatives intensified this police presence and surveillance, especially in the later half of the twentieth-century redemption. It also highlighted the profound disjuncture between the forces of the criminal justice juggernaut and the desire on the part of blacks to preserve the efficacy of black kinship systems already under attack during the redemption. Essentially, community policing purports to confront family violence. However, police officers and battered women alike suspect that such an initiative fails or is of limited worth. Community police feed black males and, to a lesser extent, black females, to the jails and prisons. Black women implicate community policing in the assault on the black race, a realization that makes it doubly difficult for those women to call the police if their intimate partners assault them.

Other themes emerged regarding the policing of domestic violence in the projects. Black women’s rage was never far from the surface of my ethnography. Women expressed rage about being victimized but also a deep anger about their miserable social conditions, the treatment of black men, the diminished life chances of their children, their poor housing, their being subject to ridiculous welfare rules, and so on. Indeed, the policing of these unfortunate women far transcends the official incursions of the Nashville Police Department, extending into every nook and cranny of their lives. It was this combination of surveillance, regulation, and abject poverty that led some brutalized women to take their chances with criminal subcultures in the projects. I will return to this theme in the next chapter.

The intimate surveillance of black women’s lives extended to their personal relationships with men. Women told me that they had to negotiate their intimate relationships carefully. They wanted lovers, fathers for their children, providers, and friends. On the other hand, they did not necessarily want them at any cost; including, for some, the cost of interpersonal violence. However, this was not always the case. I talked with several women who calculated that the cost of being occasionally assaulted did not outweigh the benefits of a male partner’s financial support; such was their personal struggle with poverty. At still another level, the criminal justice juggernaut, the welfare system, and the housing authority all mediated black women’s intimate relationships. In short, what we see in the projects is a strict regulation of women’s sexuality in a manner that differs from the patriarchal measures employed by individual men in the bedrooms of Nashville’s leafy
suburbs. In projects like Sam Levy and Preston Taylor, black men have restricted access to women, running the gauntlet of police, drug dealers, acute unemployment and poverty, and the like. Women know too well the rules of the poverty game and how it affects and shapes their interpersonal relationships. They also know from the local crack whores, and those drug dealers who have polygamous relationships with women, what other “options” are available. Indeed, as we have seen, public space for battered women in the projects is not “free” space, a place of refuge from the violence behind closed doors. Rather, as some women described it, public space amid the crack pipes and gunfire is hostile terrain, in which an incarcerated batterer can still “pay her back.” Community policing, insofar as it further regulates black heterosexuality and enranges black batterers, probably perpetuates this misery. In short, community policing, like global capitalism, is one more nail in the coffin of black kinship systems.

My ethnographic findings strongly suggest that poverty and racism exacerbate intimate violence against women. It may be that black male batterers feel compelled to use more overt violence, threats, and intimidation to exact some modicum of control over their partners. This overdependence on violence may be the reason we find disproportionately more domestic violence and domestic homicide among poor black communities. Indeed, it might be the case that their deeply compromised and highly mediated access to female partners and their generalized rage at their lot in life generates more intimate violence. Clearly, we need more research into this phenomenon.

Finally, intimate violence against women also occurs when men have jobs, a say in society, and a decent place to live. It is the case in these “better-off” families that this violence in often secretive, cumulative, and hidden from the gaze of the state. Herein lies the final limit of police intervention, be it community policing, the DUV, or regular patrol. Policing cannot compensate for the patriarchal generation of domestic violence. Indeed, we might view the policing of relatively powerless black communities as a mirror image of broader patriarchal controls. On the other hand, policing can save lives, connect some battered women with various support services, and perhaps prevent or delay homicides.

Poor black men and their street activities attract the disproportionate gaze of the criminal justice juggernaut. Does this gaze turn them into better fathers? Providers? Partners? Probably not. Rebecca, a black woman from the projects in East Nashville, expressed her concern: “There aren't any role models because they’re all locked up in jail. When I tried to reach out for help for my son, ya know . . . I knew deep down inside that I needed some help with him, even when his father was with him. And his father was a drunk, and then when he came home he wasn’t a father and he wasn’t a husband. He was just a man in the house. It seems like in Nashville black people are just stuck.”

That community policing has a difficult time penetrating families is as obvious to some police officers as it is to battered women. According to Officer Mike O'Reilly: “We’ve spent so much money and time on community policing, and my question is, ‘How much money and time are we spending on family-oriented policing?’ Because if you look at the community, it's families. If we can’t police in the family, then everything else is just window dressing. The streets may be clean, the junk cars may be towed off, the graffiti may be cleaned off the bridge or the local barbershop wall, but that's just window dressing. We’re getting the cart before the horse.”

My ethnography demonstrates that policing domestic violence in the projects is one part of a battery of social controls regulating black kinship systems, public violence, the drug trade, prostitution, and, more broadly, the increasing “surplus” urban poor. Sociologists are too quick to examine these phenomena in isolation from each other and from history. The movement against domestic violence, laudable as it is, suffers from the same myopia. We must understand such violence not only as a product of black male power and control over women, but also as a reflection of the broader historical management of the black urban poor.