Mental Health & Prevention 31 (2023) 200291



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Mental Health & Prevention

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/mhp





Black barbers as mental health advocates, and interpersonal violence and suicide preventors in the local community

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
African American
Barbers
Barbershop
Interpersonal violence
Suicide
Mental health

ABSTRACT

Homicide and suicide rank first and third among the causes of death for Black males aged under 35 in the US. Black barbers trained in supporting the mental health of their customers are uniquely positioned to intervene in the deaths of young Black males due to their frequent and personal interactions. However, few studies have explored the impact that these targeted early interventions may have on supporting the mental health of young Black men. Thus, this article undertakes a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) on the impact that early interventions from trained barbers may have on Black youth. Interviews with 32 barbers were carried out to engage with their life stories as community members, trained barbers, and personal experiences as mental health advocates including lessons learned from related training. Findings revealed that Black barbers: 1) act as a mental health lifeline for the community through their listening; 2) help break down stigmas around mental health; 3) are well positioned to intervene and prevent community and domestic violence; and 4) are also women and can be an inspiration to women in the local community. Overall, this study highlights the challenges and importance of supporting barbers of color communities through the US and the need for future studies on barbers both domestically and internationally.

1. Introduction

Homicides and suicides account for the highest and third-highest causes of death among Black males in the United States (US) under the age of 35, which is the definition used for "young Black males" herein. Firearm use made up the highest means of homicides and suicides at over 90% and 50%, respectively (National Center for Injury Prevention & Control [NCIPC], 2023). These traumatic injuries are intentional and highly personal in nature. Subsequently, considerations should be made to see if they may be preventable with effective community-based mental health interventions and support (Bauer et al., 2022; Branas et al., 2021). Homicides, which were highest for non-Hispanic black males, for example, were often caused by "interpersonal conflicts, occurrence in conjunction with another crime, or related to intimate partner violence (particularly for females)" (Fowler et al., 2018, p. 1). Relationships between victim(s) and perpetrator(s) were most often friends or intimate partners. At the same time, this means that the people who are in regular and closest contact with young Black males are in the best position to be able to deter and prevent acts of violence from occurring in the first place. In the case of surrounding community members, this has found to be true with street outreach workers (Dickinson et al., 2021) as well as employees at "schools, primary care, and other community settings" (Bottiani et al., 2021, p. 572).

It is also important to note that these homicides in the African American community can produce a ripple effect and "foster an ongoing cycle of violence in the communities afflicted by this public health disease" (Frazer et al., 2018, p. 3). Violence begets violence, whether in the form of retaliation, preemptive strikes, or immediate responsive actions. As interpersonal violence is a community problem and can result in future crimes, a collective and proactive call to action in the form of target mental health services may be the most powerful step forward. In other words, if interventions on mental health carried out in the confines of a barbershop are effective in preventing one single act of violence or a murder, then it is very possible that other similar acts within the

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2023.200291
Received 14 April 2023; Received in revised form 20 June 2023; Accepted 21 June 2023
Available online 7 July 2023
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