



Taking a Strengths-Based Perspective for Community-Level Interventions and Policies with Black Men

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Structural racism and discrimination in the lives of Black Americans is a significant national public health crisis. Racism silently pervades our educational, healthcare, employment, housing, and criminal legal systems. Recent high-profile incidents involving the brutal killings of unarmed young Black men and women have

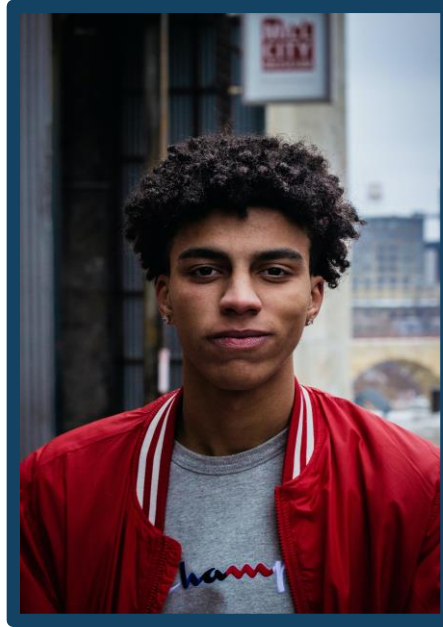


Figure 1 Photograph Photo by Creation Hill: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/man-in-red-jacket-1681010/>. CCO.

resulted in greater attention to the daily

experiences of young Black people in the United States and cross-sector appeals to eliminate structural racism and discrimination. Yet, we cannot limit our efforts to addressing these tragic incidents alone—structural racism and discrimination has a profoundly negative effect on the health and well-being of young Black men continuously, not just during national tragedies.

“For many Black emerging adult men in the United States, social-structural stressors rooted in racial discrimination are daily experiences that place them at greater risk for poor health [...] implementing interventions and policies that are community-driven and build on multiple levels of resilience may provide young Black men with more opportunities to access positive social networks and identity-affirming spaces to improve their health and well-being.”

Highlights

There is a gap in the research on the social-structural and community resources that enhance the resiliency of young Black men in the United States.

We must shift our focus to emphasize the strengths and environmental attributes that facilitate the positive development and health of young Black men.

We examined the associations between neighborhoods, social networks, and racial discrimination on Black emerging adult men's HIV-related behaviors (i.e., substance use/misuse and sexual risk behaviors) in 2019 in New Haven, Connecticut. New Haven is a midsized mixed urban-suburban city with approximately 130,000 residents and is the third largest city in Connecticut. It has experienced decades of government disinvestment, redlining, and systemic oppression which has resulted in a high concentration of poverty, crime, racial and economic segregation, and substandard housing.

Methods

Black men ages 18 - 29 years who resided in New Haven for at least six months, self-reported having had vaginal sexual intercourse in the past three months and being HIV negative were eligible for the study. Participants were recruited using advertisements on social media, flyers in venues frequented by the group (e.g., barbershops and gyms), and snowball sampling.

Our research team conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 30 Black men. The interview guide was developed with consultation from community members, an expert in Community Psychology and Black men's health, and researchers with experience engaging urban-dwelling young Black men in community health research. Questions were written to elicit content and meaning about discriminatory experiences in the locations they travel to in a typical week (activity spaces), but participants were also able to elaborate on responses, provide definitions based on their life experiences and perceptions, and clarify the ideas and feelings they experienced within their activity spaces.

Interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes and focused on participant's activity spaces—the locations to which they traveled during a typical week and who they were with at the location; experiences of discrimination in general and at racially discriminatory activity spaces (locations in which men frequent and report experiencing racial discrimination); neighborhood resources, assets, and needs; and social connectedness. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the research team to identify common themes and sub-themes across the interviews.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Our work applies a strengths-based and community-driven approach to identify social-structural resources that young Black men require and desire within their community to effectively navigate and remain resilient in the face of structural racism and discrimination. Community Psychologists recognize the importance of understanding the dynamic interplay between individuals and their communities and how these interactions shape well-being and quality of life. Our work extends that understanding by investigating community-based solutions to improve well-being. Our goal is to create social and environmental contexts where all individuals, particularly young Black men, have the conditions necessary to thrive.

Results

- Young Black men's experiences with social-structural stressors (external stressors that comprise the broader social and environmental contexts in which Black men live, work, and play) are rooted in structural racism and discrimination including racial profiling, neighborhood violence, and lack of economic opportunities.
- Young Black men need resources that support the creation and maintenance of positive social networks. They also need access to existing community-based resources and the creation of safe environments that foster a sense of community and reinforce their capacity to be resilient.
- Community-level interventions and policies are needed to counteract the social-structural challenges young Black men face in their daily lives. These strategies should focus on economic development, address pervasive income inequalities and unemployment issues, support the growth of Black-owned businesses, and establish safe and identity-affirming spaces for young Black men. We also need cross-generational mentoring programs that prioritize increasing cultural capital and provide support in accessing social-structural resources, such as local churches and libraries.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: Our research shows the resilience that exists in Black communities and highlights potential pathways for implementing multilevel interventions that leverage and bolster resilience. Researchers should prioritize partnering with Black communities to amplify and evaluate the effectiveness of programs, policies, and resources designed to safeguard and support these communities.

Practice: Practitioners should prioritize the creation of safe spaces such as churches, coffee shops, and community centers where Black men are not subjected to racial profiling, stigma, and violence. Additionally, they should provide opportunities for these men to identify and serve as positive role models, foster cross-generational connections, and offer economic opportunities. For practitioners who engaged in these efforts but have yet to have their work evaluated or documented in the literature, we advocate for seeking partnerships with researchers trained in community-based participatory research. Such partnerships are crucial to evaluating and disseminating this work.

Social Action: Access to educational and economic opportunities across the life course is a key priority and can be bolstered through financial investments in programs like the My Brother's Keeper Alliance, 100 Black Men of America, and other local initiatives.

Similar Settings: While understanding needs and social structural stressors is valuable, it is equally important to give greater attention to community strengths and assets.

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