



## Reaching out to **Male Survivors of Violence**

This brief was developed to provide outreach and engagement best practices for agencies, community-based organizations, and other entities that are working with male survivors of violence. Currently, the victim services field is not addressing the needs of boys and men of color, who are experiencing violence at alarming rates and are not being connected to the services that they need. Through interviews with hospital-based violence intervention programs, school-based health centers, and community-based organizations, this brief offers recommendations for working with male survivors of violence, and how to create an effective continuum of care and support for this hard to reach population.

### **CHALLENGES TO OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT**

The opportunity to work with male survivors of violence is rewarding, but also presents numerous challenges that can create barriers to engagement. Male survivors of violence are often disconnected from a strong family support system and struggle developing healthy and trusting relationships.<sup>1</sup> This disconnect creates young men who are often reluctant to engage with community service providers, and other related support systems. A number of outreach strategies offer ideas for developing the relationships necessary for successfully working with this population.

#### **Understanding Violence as a Public Health Issue**

Violence is a health crisis in the United States, and it should be recognized and treated as one. Rather than viewing violence as a political, moral or social problem that calls for harsh measures, many community leaders need help to understand violence as a public health problem. Like an epidemic disease, violence clusters, and spreads geographically. Many types of violence are transmitted between individuals, e.g. child abuse, community violence, partner violence, and suicide.

Furthermore, exposure to one form of violence transmits between types of violence: those exposed to war violence have an increased risk of perpetrating community violence and those exposed to community violence have an increased risk of perpetrating domestic violence.<sup>2</sup> Without a public health lens, because of their race and gender, male survivors of violence are often viewed as “perpetrators” or potential perpetrators, and any victimizations they experience are viewed by society as being at least partially their own fault. A public health lens properly applied dismisses racist societal constructs of “deserving” and “underserving” victims in favor of a trauma-informed perspective: anyone who is hurt needs healing; anywhere there is hurt, communities are vulnerable without intervention.

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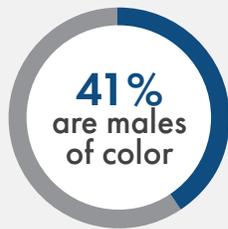
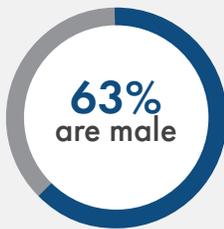
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“ Research indicates that victimized men and boys of color do not get the help and services they need. ”

## Trauma Among Young Men of Color

Young men of color experience violence at alarming rates. Each year, over 1.5 million victims of violence are treated in hospitals nationwide for nonfatal gunshot, stabbing, and other physical assault injuries; nearly two-thirds (63%) are male, and 41 percent are males of color. Violence is the leading cause of death for African American males between the ages of 15 and 34 and the second-leading cause of death for young Latino males.<sup>3</sup>

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Young men of color are disproportionately affected by interpersonal and community violence. This uneven burden of both direct and indirect violent traumas can have negative impacts on the futures of these young men. For example, studies demonstrate that being a victim of violence places an individual at increased risk of becoming a perpetrator of violence.<sup>4</sup> Violent victimization also increases the risk of being violently reinjured in the future.<sup>5</sup> Research indicates that victimized men and boys of color do not get the help and services they need.<sup>6</sup> Existing systems do not currently provide services nor do they have the cultural competency, capacity, or ability to engage, respond to and treat this population. The strategies often utilized by current service providers are simply not aligned with their needs.

## Serving Young Men of Color

Many young men of color have directly or indirectly experienced negative encounters with systems, particularly law enforcement, that diminishes their likelihood to ask for or be referred to support services. This distrust creates a significant barrier that makes it challenging for service providers to engage these young men without first rebuilding trust and respect. This is further exacerbated by the fact that service providers generally do not have staff who are culturally diverse. Staff typically lack the necessary lived experiences and cultural awareness needed to connect and build trust with young men of color.

*“As a society, we fail to recognize that some behaviors boys and young men of color express are in fact age and context appropriate. These negative behaviors are often logical responses to navigating the difficult terrain of tough urban neighborhoods.”<sup>7</sup>*

Further, young men of color are overrepresented in communities with high concentrations of crime and victimization. This creates considerable challenges around safety. Young men of color are often reluctant to venture beyond the places where they feel safe to access services. There is a prevailing fear that their likelihood of victimization is increased once they venture beyond the immediate boundaries of their community.

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“ Providers often struggle with how to respond to young men who have caused harm but have also experienced harm. ”

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Additionally, issues around masculinity create a substantial barrier to engaging young men of color. Certain cultural norms of masculinity — the idea that men should be self-reliant, tough and aggressive — can lead to unhealthy behavioral patterns in all men.<sup>8</sup> But for men of color, the issue is far more complex. Historically, men of color often shut down their emotions to avoid appearing vulnerable to social threats.<sup>9</sup> This has resulted in a lack of willingness to seek out counseling and other trauma support services.

### **Lack of Culturally-Relevant and Gender-Friendly Services**

Over the past 30 years, the victim services field has worked to develop and improve services and supports for crime victims, including victims of sexual assault and domestic violence. Young men of color have largely been left out of this push. This has resulted in a dearth of services and service providers who have the credibility and expertise to respond to the specific needs of young men of color. Often times, the practices and policies of service providers alienate and further traumatize young men of color.

Many services providers lack the credibility and cultural competence to engage young men in a meaningful way. Instead, the prevailing narrative of young men as “perpetrators,” even when victimized, creates an environment where young men of color are viewed as not being deserving of services.<sup>10</sup>

Further, many victim services agencies were developed to provide services to women and children. Providing services to men, particularly young men of color, presents many unexpected challenges. Program materials, policies and procedures are often developed in a manner that is not welcoming to men. As such, a significant organizational culture shift is often required.

### **Inflexibility of Services: Face Time is Key**

Victim services providers have struggled to evolve and change the manner in which they deliver services, particularly to underserved clients such as young men of color. Service providers often require clients to come into

a physical office location at specified times in order to receive services. Staff are often unwilling to venture out beyond the confines of their offices, into the community, to engage clients in non-traditional ways. As discussed previously, many factors, such as perceived safety, make it difficult for young men of color to engage with service providers in the way they are traditionally accustomed to engaging with clients.

Young men of color are overrepresented in neighborhoods with high concentrations of economic deprivation which creates financial challenges to accessing reliable transportation. Access to reliable transportation, coupled with other factors, creates a significant barrier to service engagement. Requiring clients to consistently travel long distances to receive services creates challenges that do not take into account their financial limitations.

## **LESSONS FROM THE FIELD**

To respond to violence in our communities and homes, reaching those most at risk for, or currently involved in, violence with effective strategies to support behavior change is crucial. However, traditional victim-service strategies for engagement may not be effective in addressing the needs of young men of color. Often, these individuals are not enrolled in academic or social services, and often may be reluctant to engage in formal help that is offered to them.



Image from 2017 Healing Justice Alliance Conference, photo credit: Move Photography

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“ There is power in being able to authentically say 'I know what you've been through.' ”

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Both systematic and cultural barriers, including racial inequity and masculinity and gender expectations, contribute to the challenges of engaging and providing services to this population. Effective methods for reaching males, such as hiring, training, and supporting peer counselors as outreach workers in communities most affected by violence are still tragically underutilized.

**A proactive approach can include some of the following recommendations:**

### **1. Hire Individuals with the Lived Experience**

A key part of outreach is having someone that the young men can find relatable. For many of the Supporting Male Survivors of Violence sites, this means hiring a cadre of individuals that have the lived experience and the neighborhood context, and have a strong understanding of the environment that the young men are coming from. Individuals with these backgrounds can access a level with the young men that others, without it, cannot. There is power in being able to authentically say “I know what you've been through.” With or without a lot of self-disclosure, community peers have a unique opportunity to engage young men because of their shared experiences.

Remember, relationship comes before casework. Have those positive, healthy adults to build relationships with the young men and consistently be there for these even brief moments and interactions even when you think that nothing comes from that interaction. After a series of interactions, once that trust and relationship is built, then all of a sudden the young men will openly come to you, opening up about their stories and asking for help. Being there consistently for the small check-ins can amount to a stronger relationship being built. There's the famous aphorism that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Young men of color who have been traumatized know how much you care by your time, attention, and consistency. Even if it is a little thing, like saying you will pick them up for lunch, showing up and doing it builds trust. Healing Hurt People, Philadelphia, found that establishing

a trusting relationship with other men in a safe and supportive manner is an important part of developing healthy behaviors. Deepening the understanding of what trauma-informed means when interacting with these young men is critical, and how you carry out those set of principles with them. Program staff stated: In doing so, the male mentors can engage the young men in a safety conversation in a way that is not prescriptive with the way that we think safety is but more so in a motivational interview perspective where we understand how they view safety and the contextual factors about what safety is to them. As a result, we make sure that whatever safety plan we are helping them to develop, that they are a lead in developing them.

### **2. Provide Culturally Appropriate Services**

Research indicates that victimized men and boys of color do not get the help and services they need. Existing systems do not currently provide services nor do they have the cultural competency, capacity, or ability to engage, respond to and treat this population.<sup>11</sup> The strategies often utilized by current service providers are simply not aligned with their needs. Inability to access culturally appropriate services therefore increases the likelihood that men and boys of color will be forced to silently suffer the effects of victimization and trauma and less likely to heal. Further barriers to services and treatment exist in the context of male masculinity, as men struggle to self-identify as victims due to social norms that define victimization as weakness.<sup>12</sup>

Given these realities, it is important that those serving male survivors of violence enhance or offer more culturally relevant, trauma-informed services to better meet the needs of this population, such as:

**Addressing Masculinity** – Train service providers and staff on healthy masculinity. Often times, people are operating from a very limited definition of what it means to be a man or how a male should behave. Opening up that frame to include a more asset and strength-based understanding can facilitate a more positive, and healthy relationship with the young men that you are working with. Consider an organization's experience working with LGBTQ boys and young men? What support and/or resources are in place to offer LGBTQ clients?

Many males will resist identifying as a “victim” or possibly even as a “survivor.” Person-first language may be useful in separating a man’s experience or behavior from his identity (i.e. “the man who was shot” or “the person who shot me” rather than “the victim” or the perpetrator.” Person-first allows both providers and the men themselves to see an individual as more complex than a specific act or interaction.

It is important to understand the world through each man’s unique lens. By engaging in conversation with your male clients about what being a man is and to demystify and unpack what that means for them, the barriers to help-seeking may become more apparent. It may be helpful to reinforce the idea that asking for help reveals strength and leadership, and not weakness. When young men don’t ask for help when it is needed, they assume all burden that could be shared among peers, friends, and family members.

**Being Trauma-Informed –** Trauma impacts how individuals access services. Therefore, it is important to be aware that individuals who have experienced ongoing trauma, many of whom are survivors of violence, may encounter challenges with opening up about their experiences and building trust. Educate staff about what trauma is and how that might show up with the clients they serve, and how to respond most effectively, in order to prevent re-traumatization. There are numerous helpful resources and toolkits available online that programs can access to train staff on trauma informed practices and strategies.<sup>13,14</sup>

**Culturally-Relevant Content and Information –** Is culturally and linguistically appropriate language at the center of an organization’s messaging? Is it strength-based? What images are used on the printed materials? Are they of other young men of color? If so, are they culturally-relevant and positive images of young men of color? One way to ensure that materials, content, and curriculum are aligned with the intended audience is to solicit input from the young men of color that are being served. Bring together a small focus group of young men to help inform and refine the materials so that they are culturally and generationally appropriate.<sup>15</sup>

## Meet Young Men Where They’re At

Boys and young men often face increased risks and challenges to accessing services, waiting for them to come to request services is unlikely to result in high levels of engagement and service utilization. Strategies for working with boys and young men of color have to be targeted because there is no one-size fits all approach to reach all communities. Often times, creating universal strategies can lead to increased disparities; what works for one community might not work for another. It is important that service providers create opportunities for enhanced access to services and conduct strategic outreach and follow up with young men in the communities they seek to reach. Failure to consider this can result in frustration and burnout by direct service providers attempting to address the needs of survivors of violence.

Supporting Male Survivors of Violence sites have found that having presence in the community and face time with the young men is an invaluable strategy for recruiting them into their programs. For Healing Hurt People, Philadelphia, whose project recruit’s young men of color for a community health worker peer training academy, this proved to be successful.

Tony Thompson, Field and Training Coordinator had this to share about his outreach methods:

*“There are places that of course where we have blind spots, but face time was very valuable in terms of recruitment; setting up time to meet with the client population to give context to what we were doing. After the first week of being out in the streets and meeting people, the applications started to flood in.”*



Image from 2017 Healing Justice Alliance Conference, photo credit: Move Photography

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“ Addressing trauma and violence often requires working with family members to examine the impact of these issues in the home. ”

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For programs like the Boston Violence Intervention Advocacy Program (VIAP) at Boston Medical Center, this also means being out in the community strengthening partnerships and meeting the young men where they are. They partnered with a local community development corporation in Madison Park to provide career readiness services and full-time employment to eligible male survivors of violence in the neighborhood where they live. VIAP hosted a workforce development program that included a guaranteed job with Boston Medical Center after successful completion.

Sometimes, where services are provided can be a barrier for many young people to access; whether it is transportation and/or geopolitical, at times you have to be innovative with how and where you provide the services to reach your intended target population.

### **Engage Family and Community Members**

The local community represents an important network for youth to access services and resources. Developing relationships, which may include their parents/guardians, friends, partners, members of their faith communities and the community-at-large, present an opportunity to expand the young men’s support network. The development of this network helps to instill a belief that there is a supportive team working together for their benefit.

Addressing trauma and violence often requires working with family members to examine the impact of these issues in the home. California School-Based Health Alliance’s Young Men’s Empowerment Collaborative Program (YMEC), which works with young men in middle schools and high schools in West Contra Costa County, California, quickly realized that incorporating the young men’s extended network is a key tenant in the success of their healing. Often times in the school settings, when parents/guardians are contacted it is usually for something that is not positive and so they are very quick to not respond

to a phone call from the school. The team has initiated a practice of small positive interactions with the parents/guardians – doing some awareness, appreciations, activities out in the community- to begin to build and strengthen relationships so that the team can be seen as a trusted support system for their youth but also for the parents as well.

### **CONCLUSION**

Male survivors of violence come with a unique set of needs, but also with many natural talents and abilities. There are many institutional and systemic challenges that exist with serving this population that have much to do with misconceptions or stereotypes that are further perpetuated by societal, media, law enforcement and community messages regarding who victims are and whose victimization matters. This brief offers a set of practices that were informed by experts in the community working with this population with the intent of creating greater awareness for the needs of this population, and offers effective ways to better serve them in order to improve outcomes for male survivors of violence and support them on their path to healing.



*Image from 2017 Healing Justice Alliance Conference, photo credit: Move Photography*

## ABOUT THE SERIES

### The Healing Justice Alliance

The [Healing Justice Alliance](#) is a partnership between Youth ALIVE!, Cure Violence, the National Network of Hospital-based Violence Intervention Programs (NNHVIP) and Berkeley Media Studies Group. HJA has over combined 60 years of experience in training private and public sector agency leadership and staff members that are part of comprehensive, multi-system efforts that respond to crime victims and address violence as a health issue.

Based in Oakland, California, Youth ALIVE! works to help violently wounded people heal themselves and their community. Their overarching mission is to prevent violence and create young leaders through violence prevention, intervention and healing.

Cure Violence stops the spread of violence by using the methods and strategies associated with disease control – detecting and interrupting conflicts, identifying and treating the highest risk individuals, and changing social norms. Cure Violence is guided by clear understandings that violence is a health issue.

With over 30 member programs across the U.S. and beyond, the National Network of Hospital-based Violence Intervention Programs (NNHVIP) seeks to connect and support hospital-based, community-linked violence intervention and prevention programs and promote trauma-informed care for communities impacted by violence. Its vision is that all patients and families impacted by violence will receive equitable trauma-informed care through their hospital and within their community.

Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) helps community groups and public health professionals practice media advocacy and the strategic use of mass media to advance policies that improve health. Ultimately, BMSG aims to help reshape how news, entertainment, and advertising present health and social issues.

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### The Supporting Male Survivors of Violence initiative

In 2015, the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) awarded the Healing Justice Alliance (HJA)<sup>16</sup> a grant to provide training and technical assistance (TTA) to [FY 2015 Supporting Male Survivors of Violence](#) grantees. A collaboration between OVC and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the grant initiative aims to help improve responses to male survivors of violence and their families.

In 2013, OVC released its Vision 21: Transforming Victim Services Final Report. At the core of the report, OVC identified key priorities for providing services to victims of crime.<sup>17</sup>

#### These priorities include:

- **The need to make services accessible for all victims in all communities.**
- **Development of expansive, flexible, and innovative service models.**
- **And a holistic approach to addressing the historical institutional, geographic, and cultural barriers.**

OVC recognizes that in order for crime victims to gain physical, emotional, and financial recovery from the effects of their victimization, there needs to be a significant shift in the way in which services are provided. This is particularly evident when looking at services available to young men of color who have experienced harm.

Twelve demonstration projects across the country – from Baltimore, Maryland to Santa Cruz, California – were selected to create and implement culturally relevant and trauma informed programs and interventions to engage male survivors of violence, specifically, young men of color (YMOC) and their families impacted by trauma and violence.

#### The overarching goals of the initiative include:

1. **Creating a multi-disciplinary network of partners to provide coordinated services and support for male survivors of violence and their families.**
2. **Conducting outreach and training to educate stakeholders on the adverse effects of trauma and violence; and, developing methods to overcome barriers that prevent male survivors of violence and their families from accessing services and support.**<sup>18</sup>

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## THANK YOU FOR READING!

For more information: [healingjusticealliance.org](http://healingjusticealliance.org) | [@HJAlliance](https://twitter.com/HJAlliance) | [youthalive.org](http://youthalive.org) | [cureviolence.org](http://cureviolence.org) | [bmsg.org](http://bmsg.org) | [nnhvip.org](http://nnhvip.org)

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