Addressing Masculine Norms to Improve Life Outcomes for Young Black Men: Why We Still Can’t Wait

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For the purposes of this paper, we have chosen to use the term Black to refer to individuals in the United States who identify as having African ancestry (African American, Afro-Caribbean, African immigrant). This term more fully encompasses the heterogeneity and rich diversity of the Black community.

WHY WE STILL CAN’T WAIT—A Foreword by Loren Harris

“Ignorance of each other is what has made unity impossible in the past. Therefore, we need enlightenment. We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity.” ~ Malcolm X

America is at a critical crossroads. The nation faces the challenge of fulfilling its promise as an inclusive democracy for all, or, continuing as a society crumbling from the weight of anachronistic beliefs and behaviors that concentrate power, wealth and resources in the control of a few. The prospect of realizing a more just society continues to pivot on matters of social and economic equity. The contours of opportunity remain overly determined by socially constructed hierarchies of race, gender, and class. Intersecting identities—such as being Latino, heterosexual and working class, or, gay and Black—too often function as filters for privilege and disadvantage.

This report arrives as vitriol and violence surrounding the equitable treatment of Black people by the nation’s criminal justice system have elevated beyond boiling. Current pleas for racial equity in the criminal justice system and beyond are not new—indeed, it can be asserted that these concerns are as American as apple pie. This report makes explicit the importance of interrogating both race and gender in the struggle for the integrity of Black bodies. The bodily integrity of Black people has historically been a point of social and economic tension. The contemporary contention that ‘Black lives matter’ can be seen as part of a centuries-long call for justice rather than a 21st century flashpoint. From this perspective, demands for an end to the racially inequitable treatment of (and state-sanctioned violence towards) young men of color might be better understood as part of the unfinished business of challenging long-held mainstream notions of Black masculinity as unbridled, exotic, dangerous, and even predatory.

This social stew informs the development of norms of manhood that influence how young Black men understand and engage educational opportunity, labor force participation and relationships with women and other men. Rigid masculine ideals limit conceptions of opportunity and expose many young men to stigmatization, abuse and violence because they are neither attainable nor sustainable over time. Masculinity and gender impact nearly every facet of funders’ and agency’s interaction with young Black men, yet they are seldom held up like race and class.

Amid a historic inflection point, TrueChild and Frontline Solutions produce this important work that contributes to our understanding the lives of young Black males. It is a timely echo of Robert Frost’s timeless writing, The Road Not Taken, in which two roads diverge in a wood. Wilchins and Gilmer offer a less traveled path that could help improve awareness and grow understanding of how race and gender norms operate in a hierarchy of privilege. They also suggest openings for deepening how we make sense of gender norms and masculinity as factors that could be leveraged to improve life outcomes among Black men. If we take Malcolm X’s foretelling to heart, the opportunities highlighted here could lead to a less familiar path that holds great promise for the future of Black communities, and indeed the whole nation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

It’s not safe to be any kind of Black man in America. And widespread awareness of that fact is overdue and now widespread.

Only a few years ago, “respectability politics” still held sway—the argument that persistent lower life outcomes among young Black men were the result of their failure to internalize middleclass White ideals of manliness, from having a regular job, to “acting right,” and saying “thank you” and “yes, sir” on cue. If young men would only pull their pants up, and give up “street manhood,” things would all get better.

“Doing” middleclass White manhood does not inoculate Black men who are still prey for police injustice, vigilante assaults, or community-based violence. Being respectable like James Blake, well-educated like Henry Louis Gates, or rich like Thabo Sefalosha is no protection.

In the wake of this new reality, next-generation civil rights organizations like #BlackLivesMatter and Dream Defenders are arguing forcefully for the full humanity of Black men and their right to embody manhood on their own terms, whether or not it conforms to middleclass White ideals.

The problem, they argue, is not urban Black manhood, but that no version of manhood can now be expected to protect them from ingrained attitudes of structural racism.

What is needed now is to work on two fronts simultaneously.

First, we need to have a true national conversation about manhood ideals and the fiction that more respectable versions of masculinity will somehow protect young Black men and boys from oppression. That dialog (like so many involving race) is long overdue.

Second, although the promise of “respectability politics” stands revealed as empty, we need to also interrogate the ways that buying into rigid codes of masculinity still lead to lower life outcomes among young men, including young men of color.

As Loren Harris noted in the Ford Foundation’s 2007 report, “Why We Can’t Wait: A Case for Philanthropic Action” (in many ways the inspiration for this paper)—“gender roles influence the way [young Black] men understand and engage educational opportunity, labor force participation, and relationships with women and other men...limiting conceptions of opportunity and success and exposing some to stigmatization, abuse and violence...” [6].

In addressing the impact of harsh ideals of manhood, we need to bear in mind that these are not “street codes” of manhood peculiar to the Black community, but rather frontier codes of American manhood that have a long history. They include injunctions to not show feelings, never back down, and always meet force with force. These codes of masculinity inform the behavior police officers involved in unjustified shootings display every bit as much as they impact the choices of the young men in their crosshairs.

We also need to bear in mind that while decades of studies suggest that addressing rigid codes of masculinity can lead to better life outcomes in areas like education, health, or economic security, they cannot and will not protect our young men from racism, or fulfil the now-empty vision of “respectability politics.”

“Black Girls Matter”

In 2013 TrueChild and Dr. Scyatta Wallace published a report for the Heinz Endowments titled: “Gender Norms - A Key to Improving Health & Wellness Among Black Women & Girls.” Challenging gender-exclusive racial initiatives, Kimberle’ Crenshaw and the African American Policy Forum have wondered in “Black Girls Matter: Pushed-Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected” whether the price for increased attention to young Black men might be ignoring women and girls, because males are perceived as especially endangered. This paper’s own focus on young men is not intended as further evidence for her contention, but rather to complement our earlier report (viewable online with its accompanying model curriculum at truechild.org/Heinz)
With that in mind, this paper is offered as an outline for the case that addressing rigid masculine norms can improve health and well-being among young Black men and boys. In doing so, it includes several promising examples of visionary practitioners who are helping young men navigate and even challenge rigid gender norms.

II. ABOUT GENDER NORMS

“All your life you was raised to be what? A man. You see what I’m saying? So your train of thought is that when I see another man, that either you need to be doing what I’m doing or you doing something a little better than what I’m doing” [7].

As the quote above illustrates, young Black men and boys face special challenges and barriers related to both their race and gender which can impact their health, achievement, and life outcomes. This is especially true for those in low-income communities, who have the added challenges associated with poverty.

The effects of race are well-explored, and researchers have found strong links to lower life outcomes in health, sexuality, and intimate relationships [8].

But what about gender? In this context we mean “gender” not as the biological fact of being male or female, or even as specific traits usually associated with one sex or the other.

Rather, we mean the rules, customs, beliefs, and expectations for being a man or woman, as well as the inherent inequities of power and privilege usually associated with these practices: what are often called “gender norms.”

Traditional norms of masculinity are understood as a combination of strength, aggression, emotional toughness, dominance, and sexual prowess [9-12].

Traditional femininity is usually considered to be a combination of the “three Ds” of being desirable, deferential, and dependent [13, 14].

Both of these vary in important ways among racial and ethnic groups; nonetheless key features seem remarkably common across very different subcultures.

This may be because while biological sex is a physical fact of bodies, gender norms are cultural, and are learned from childhood onward.

In fact, learning how to “do” manhood or womanhood and be recognized as a masculine young man or a feminine young woman may be the central rite of passage (and developmental task) of adolescence.

This can be especially true during what some experts call the “gender intensification” years of late adolescence and early adulthood, when interest in traditional gender norms accelerates, and belief in them starts to solidify [15].

This awareness of gender norms grows because there is an increased expectation from the young person's environment (i.e., family, community, and society) for them to behave according to traditional gender norm standards.

As the young person moves from adolescence to early adulthood, they experience increasing pressures and expectations that they will conform to gender norms.

After years of being under-studied, there is finally a significant and growing body of research that addresses the impact of both race and masculine norms among young Black males. While it is still a fraction of that devoted to studying young White men, the authors sincerely hope it will continue growing.
III. WHAT WE KNOW

Decades of the basic research has now found that when young men and women internalize rigid ideals for masculinity and femininity, they have markedly lower life outcomes in a cluster of related areas that can include: basic health, education outcomes, and partner violence [8, 16, 17].

The fact that gender norms affect these distinct but overlapping problems is one reason some experts refer to these ideals as a “gateway belief system”—one that begins in childhood, solidifies in adolescence, and, once internalized, propagates disparities in a cluster of related areas.

This is not to say that gender norms explain everything—health or violence are complex intersectional problems—but rather that they would explain a great deal, if they could only be integrated into research and programmatic priorities.

Gender norms vary among different cultures and subcultures. One key finding from researchers is that some aspects of gender norms may be different for or have unique impacts on young Black men compared with their White counterparts.

For instance, the Black Youth Project surveyed 1,590 Black, White and Hispanic young people between the ages of 15 and 25 about their attitudes regarding gender roles and discrimination. They found there were race differences in the gender roles identified by youth [18].

They also found that Black youth were more likely than those of other races to believe that Black men face a lot of discrimination in the U.S. generally, and in their communities.

In addition, studies show that young Black men may also integrate culturally specific notions of manhood into their conceptions of masculinity, “drawing on fragments of the dominant masculinity [and] piecing together aspects of it to establish their own standards and meanings…” in ways that are independent of the dominant White ideals [19].

Despite the growing research documenting the impact of gender norms on issues like health or education as well as their connection to race or class, in the US public policy, programming, and funding priorities still mostly ignore them. They continue to try to develop effective solutions in what noted researcher Hortensia Amaro once called “a gender vacuum” [20].

That statement was made in 1995, yet it remains largely true today.

Major international donor institutions like CARE. UNFPA (United National Population Fund), UNAIDS (United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS), and WHO (World Health Organization) have all acted, implementing new initiatives that challenge rigid gender norms and inequities they cause.

USAID (US Agency for International Development) no longer funds new programs that lack a strong gender focus [21]. PEPFAR (US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) has made masculinity one of its top three priorities [22]. And the World Bank has begun an extensive and highly public effort to pull gender norms through many aspects of its equity work worldwide [23].

But in this area the US lags behind. The authors hope that this paper will be part of an overdue dialog between researchers and practitioners that can begin moving gender norms to the center of funding debates; reconnect it with factors like race, class, ethnicity, and disability; and make programs and policies that serve young men more effectively.

While studies have noted harsher manhood codes in low-income environments, some researchers have found that young Black men from middle-and upper-class backgrounds reported stronger pressures to conform, perhaps to compensate for their more privileged economic status. [Roberts 2012 - Exploring Positive Masculinity Devel]
IV. AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

While researchers have often examined race, class, or gender, studying each in isolation fails to accurately reflect the complexities and life experiences of the people they describe [24-28]. Categories such as race and gender do not act independently of one another, but instead interact, are bound together and influenced by one another. An analysis that asks not what it means to be male or Black, but male and Black—which examines both race and gender, as well as factors like age and class—is what theorist Kimberle Crenshaw has called “intersectional” [28, 29]. Intersectionality seeks to examine the ways in which these categories interact on multiple levels. While there are decades of scholarship which has theoretically examined the concept of intersectionality, unfortunately the empirical research in this area is limited.

We still lack data to help explain gender differences, poorer life outcomes, and the values, beliefs and practices that are the basis for how Black males understand and enact manhood.

In these gaps, the real experiences of young Black men live, but remain hidden from us. As empirical studies with a focus on intersectionality increase, we will begin to fill in the missing explanatory models needed to take this work to a deeper level.

Indeed, it is still almost impossible to talk about race in America without also talking about class. The two are so intertwined it is almost impossible to separate them. The impact of gender norms is no different. Many of the life disparities that this report touches on—early pregnancy, partner violence, education outcomes—are strongly affected by class and socio-economic status (SES) [30-32]. Indeed, in under-resourced communities, codes for masculinity and femininity are apt to be especially narrow, penalties for transgressing them particularly harsh, and opportunities for constructively displaying public manhood or womanhood few [33, 34]. This means the impact of harmful rigid masculine norms on young Black men in these communities can be magnified.

It is not that young Black men in affluent suburban communities do not experience similar problems with codes of manhood—studies show they do. Rather, it is that in higher income neighborhoods these impacts are buffered by the presence of additional personal resources and social capital.

V. ABOUT THIS PAPER

Given the added risk of low-income status, this report will focus on young Black men in low-income communities.

This group was chosen not as an endpoint, but as a beginning to what is hoped will become growing dialogue on the unique lives and challenges faced by young Black men. We hope it will provide a framework of how gender norms can better inform philanthropic and programmatic efforts on their behalf.

Thus, this report focuses on four problem areas where the research base is extensive and well-accepted:

- Basic health and wellness;
- Educational achievement and economic security;
• Reproductive and sexual health; and,
• Intimate partner and male-on-male violence.

In doing so, it is important to note that almost nothing in this paper is unique to young Black men.

On the contrary, studies consistently find that many of the same impacts are experienced by young White, Latino, Asian-Pacific Islander, or American Indian males who internalize rigid gender norms and live in low-income environments [31, 32]. Many of them also experience similar levels of stress and even trauma.

What is unique is the continuing impact of structural racism and the effects of state-sanctioned racial subjugation (and extermination), the special challenges of poverty, and chronic life stress can combine to create particular vulnerabilities for young Black men and boys.

In this connection, we are also sensitive to the need to avoid adding to the already extensive “Crisis Literature” on young Black men which focuses narrowly on the grim outcomes many of them face.

While this paper is concerned with impacts and problems, as community initiatives like Black Male Engagement (BMe) keep pointing out, young Black men and boys bring immense resources and resilience to the life challenges they face [35].

In addition, there are positive as well as negative aspects to both masculine and feminine norms in every culture. Many young Black men gain strength and sustenance from their engagement with masculine norms, and from other Black men.

The expanding popularity of mentoring and rites of passage programs that pair younger and older males are just one example, as are programs like the Campaign for Black Male Achievement and A Call to Men.

As Loren Harris’ “Why We Can’t Wait” explained: “Our concern with the state of Black males is [the hope that] we are simultaneously challenging narrow notions of gender roles, particularly masculinity… and identifying strategies that can help reduce poverty among families and communities” [6].

This report documents scholarship that shows great promise for informing a gender-based approach to examining the lives of young Black men. It will also highlight potential strategies to improve the life outcomes of young Black men.

It is offered as a first approximation, a beginning to what we hope will be growing dialog on the unique lives of young Black men and a framework for thinking about race-based gender norms that can better inform philanthropic and programmatic efforts. There is still so much to learn, and so much we need to know.

VI. BASIC HEALTH & WELLNESS

Stress

Young Black men have unique race and gendered experiences, which result in multiple stresses that may weaken their immune system and expose them to higher rates of disease and lowered levels of health and well-being.

Studies show this stress begins in childhood and continues into adulthood and is exacerbated by things like exposure to high rates of poverty, violence, and poor nutrition [36, 37].

Chronic exposure to racial discrimination also creates psychological “wear and tear” that can affect both mental and physical health [2, 38, 39].
In addition, young men must also navigate pressure to conform to traditional masculine ideals of the dominant culture as well as “frontier” codes of masculinity common to many low-income communities, both Black and White, which prioritize toughness and aggression [40].

They must learn how to navigate and cope with the inequities inherent in a traditional gender system that demands that males be at all times strong, dominant, and aggressive—and that females be dependent and deferential. Some will also be exposed to psychological, physical, or sexual violence, along with the trauma that so often accompanies it.

Over time, chronic stress and “John Henryism”, characterized by persistent strong efforts to cope with and master it—can lead to depression and a compromised immune system. This “weathering” lowered immune response can leave men vulnerable to chronic health problems like hypertension, diabetes, substance abuse, and heart disease as they age [2, 38].

Help-Seeking

Even when health care is needed, rigid codes of manhood dictate that young men should man up by “toughing out” pain, injury, and illness and avoid complaining or seeking help from others [19, 41].

Young men “will often risk their physical health and well-being rather than be associated with traits they or others may perceive as feminine” [42].

As a result, young Black men will often avoid seeking medical help until their bodies are in crisis from treatable, and in some cases, even preventable, illnesses.

In addition, in low-income communities, money for medical care is often scarce, and there may be other competing priorities that take precedence over attending to personal health issues [43].

Even when they do resolve to focus on maintaining health, studies find that John Henryism can lead Black men to be overly self-reliant, making their own determinations about what health issues they are having, and coming up with their own “solutions” [2, 38].

Being strong and self-reliant can be very positive attributes, especially in a system that works to persistently diminish the potential and contributions of Black men. And John Henryism (in limited circumstances) can also help reduce rates of depression, helping men feel a sense of mastery over poverty, discrimination, and other chronic stressors.

However, over time, other coping strategies that are more social and less strictly self-reliant are necessary for long-term health. Changing the discourse about Black men and masculinity among parents, providers, and Black men themselves could have a positive impact on their health and well-being. Programmatic efforts to redefine masculine strength as empowering Black men to reach out to and engage others or accept medical assistance when needed might have many beneficial effects.

VII. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Unplanned Pregnancy & HIV

Decades of research have found that sexual and reproductive health outcomes are lower for young Black men compared to males from other racial groups. For instance, studies have found that young Black males are more likely to have sex early (before age 13) and that by age 19 they have had an average of 11 sexual partners—double that of non-White Hispanic males [44].
Power inequities are inherent in the norms associated with intimate male-female relations as well as genuine physical difference. It is apparent in the terms often used by adolescents for sexually active males versus females, and in norms that demand men to be the aggressor during sex while women are silent about their relationship and/or sexual needs.

Studies show that belief in rigid codes of manhood are strongly linked to less intimate relationships, more sexual partners (including commercial sex workers), earlier age of first sex, more sexual risk-taking, and lower levels of condom use [11, 20].

In addition, belief in traditional masculinity has been linked to stronger tendency to view pregnancy as validating manhood, and female responsibility for preventing conception [11, 20].

All of these attitudes and behaviors are tied to higher rates of unplanned pregnancy, HIV, and other STIs.

In some low-income communities, young men may also “adopt manipulative and exploitative attitudes with women” with the objective of “getting over” in a game of sexual conquest [45]. In one survey, three-fifths of Black adolescents thought that deception was acceptable in order to get a girl to have sex. [ibid]

Partially, in response, low-income male peer groups “emphasize sexual prowess as a mark of manhood, at times including babies as its evidence” [46]. This is exacerbated by the aversion among some many young men (Black or White) to condom use as “undermining their masculinity or virility” [45].

**Gay Males & MSM**

While some of these findings might not be entirely surprising for heterosexual males (and are actually shared by many low-income White males), they might be expected to be different for gay men and other Black men who have sex with men (MSM). Yet, for the most part, many of the findings are similar.

Although some men who are gay or bisexual or otherwise have sex with men (MSM) opt for alternative constructions of masculinity, many internalize similar codes of manhood as deeply, if not more so, than their straight peers [47].

Because of this, such men are more likely to see promiscuity as a validation of manhood, view “barebacking” and sexual risk-taking as manly, perceive penetration as the gold standard of manly sex, and avoid kissing, hugging and other (non-penetrative) intimacy as weak and feminine [48].

Young men who are conflicted about their homosexual behavior are also more likely to engage in substance abuse to lower their inhibitions and provide deniability for encounters—thus increasing the likelihood of unplanned and/or risky sex.

**Media Effects**

Both gay and straight young men also face special challenges to their reproductive health from distorted media portrayals of Black masculinity, which only reinforce the negative impact of racial gender norms [49].

Black audiences in general tend to watch more television, and while young people generally spend up to seven hours or more with media daily, Black youth spend up to 13 hours each day with media [50].

Yet movies, TV, and videos offer few affirming images for young Black men in terms of relationships, intimacy, or sexuality. Black men are often presented as devoid of depth or love, and as of little importance beyond their aggression or prowess with women.
This is reflected in the limited roles most often available for young Black male actors as thugs, enforcers, or rap stars. Moreover, there are few examples of healthy dating or intimate relationships available, in which young Black men might model more positive behaviors.

Thus it is not surprising that a host of studies has linked internalizing these negative images to lower life outcomes. This can be especially important during childhood and adolescence, when Black boys are more susceptible to media influence [51]. Moreover, Black audiences are especially attuned to media representations of themselves [49].

Understanding the relationship dynamics among young Black men and their partners is a crucial area of study. More research is needed that examines how gender norms are practiced in intimate and sexual relationships, what protective factors may help young Black men build more productive images of masculinity in relationships, and what programmatic strategies—particularly around gender norms—can help teach them healthier relationships.

VIII. INTIMATE PARTNER AND MALE-ON-MALE VIOLENCE

Partner Violence

Male Attitudes

Intimate partner violence (IPV) and girlfriend abuse are serious problems for many young women, particularly for Black girls, among whom IPV rates are higher than that of those of Hispanics or Whites [52]. One large study found that IPV was reported by 18 percent of Black girls [53].

Scholars have argued that IPV should be examined through the lens of intersectionality, taking race, class, and gender norms into account [29, 54].

For instance, Blassingame (1972) and Levine (1977) have noted that slavery and then institutional racism combined with chronic unemployment have often fueled feelings of male anger and frustration that can sometimes be displaced onto female partners—what one researcher termed “frustrated masculinity syndrome” [55].

Young men who internalize ideals of manhood as defined by aggression, dominance and toughness are more likely to abuse female partners [34].

In particular, they are more likely to believe that control of a female partner can be a crucial indicator of public manhood.

Being defied or shown up by an “insubordinate” female partner, or otherwise having her publicly challenge his authority—can be seen as the height of unmanliness and justification for a violent response [56].

Rigid codes of manhood may also include male privileges of determining when and how sex occurs, and the use of sexual coercion when an intimate partner is unreceptive or insists on negotiating condom use.

Some studies of abuse perpetrators have found that they have a strong system of self-justification for abuse, often asserting that female partners “brought it on themselves” by not carrying out feminine responsibilities (e.g. household labor, cooking, child care, and “taking care” of their man).

Such narratives can play heavily on crude stereotypes of women as dependent, emotionally impulsive, and irrational. Men justify violence by asserting that they had a responsibility to re-establish control, rationality and respect in the relationship. When punished, they may even assert that they were the real victims.

Many IPV groups have done outstanding work in prioritizing masculine norms: California’s Futures Without Violence, Minnesota’s Men As Peacemakers, and DC’s Men Can Stop Rape are just a few examples.
The lack of available Black males (particularly due to extraordinary rates of incarceration) adds to the natural power imbalances in intimate relationships, increasing young men’s sense of entitlement and their expectation of deference while increasing girls’ own convictions that they must defer to their partner’s prerogatives.

**Female Attitudes**

Attitudes among young Black women can also play a part. For instance, studies have found that Black women themselves are prone to agree that, naturally, men mistreat women (“all men are dogs”), that anger and rage are integral to masculinity, and that abuse can be one way men express love [56-58].

In addition, young Black women are taught that they should defer to Black men and grant them the respect they have long been denied, in order to avoid adding to their ongoing emasculation. This can mean subordinating their own needs to that of the community, to show solidarity in the face of a dominant and hostile culture [57, 58].

Many women see attracting an older, more powerful man as an important proof of femininity. Such relationships can add to the power inequalities already inherent in most heterosexual relationships, in which men not only have greater physical power, but usually can exercise greater economic power through higher-states and better paying jobs, greater social resources, and through ties to other men in positions of strength.

Because of this, partner violence can also include an older, stronger male threatening or punishing a younger, less mature partner with psychological, economic, or social abuse.

**Media Stereotypes**

Media also plays a role in IPV. Studies show that viewing stereotypic portrayals of Black women can increase the risks of victimization by their male partners [59]. Young men may also internalize raced and gendered media stereotypes of “strong Black men” who are naturally aggressive and dominant, and consciously or unconsciously seek to embody them.

It has been argued that educating young men about the harms of normative masculinity to themselves and to women and working to foster greater empathy and egalitarian connections with young women may be a strategy to combat IPV against Black girls [56].

It appears likely that providing Black youth with opportunities for cross-gender friendships, activities, and engagement may help decrease coercive sexual behaviors and foster more egalitarian relationships.

**Male-on-Male**

Male-on-male violence is still a critical problem in urban environments, with homicide often the leading cause of death for young men. Race, class, and gender norms all contribute to the problem.

In narrow street codes of manhood, honor and respect are hard-won, easy to lose, and thus must be constantly defended. Even the smallest threat can grow into something bigger.

In such an environment, “demonstrating toughness and a willingness to use violence can become central elements of masculinity... both to maintain a reputation and provide an illusion of safety” [19].

Significantly, studies have found that stronger beliefs in traditional masculinity is strongly linked to more lethal assaults, like gun violence [60], and that young men who committed these assaults frequently had internalized exaggerated notions of masculinity and the need to defend their manhood at all costs [61].
Complicating matters, one-in-three Black males will have some involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice systems during their lifetimes [62]. There is also a growing awareness of the ways that law enforcement systems often target young men of color, and increases their risk of eventual incarceration.

Many of these men will be exposed to penal environments, where harsh and rigid codes of prison manhood are the norm, and violence is integral to survival, before being returned to their communities.

LGBT Violence

Author Michael Kimmel has argued that homophobia is a central organizing principle of manhood, because homosexuality represents the “feminine role.”

Homophobic and transphobic attacks may be seen not as a rejection of sexuality per se, but rather a rejection of anything weak, unmanly, or feminine [63].

For instance, in one study of such attacks, a participant explained, “All my life, I’ve been brought up to be a man. You’re going to accept responsibility, you’re going to be independent, you’re going to take care of your family. Anything get in the way, you’re going to handle your business. So now here’s something that’s contrary to what a man is, walking down the street.” [7].

Balancing the Picture

Despite such explanations, and despite popular culture’s reflexive association of young Black men with aggression, it is important to note that the vast majority are not violent towards one another or towards others [19].

Indeed, “although there is much public concern currently about violence by and among young men, most are not involved, and the quieter contribution of the majority of young men to the safety and well-being of others is generally unacknowledged” [19].

As the Black Male Achievement Initiative has noted, it is important to balance the widespread narratives of aggression or violence by always pointing to the “positive narratives that build off the assets that exist, and celebrates and promotes” young Black men [64].

IX. EDUCATION

Masculinity & Education

Studies have found that young Black males frequently do as well or better than their White counterparts right up until the “gender intensification” years of 10-14, when drop-out and stop-out rates begin to climb, and grade point averages begin to drop. Both of these can be tied to masculine norms.

To begin with, the increasing desire among many adolescents to be seen as manly can put them at odds with any of the activities necessary for successful schoolwork.

Being respectful of teachers, obeying adult authority figures, sitting quietly in class, and obediently turning in homework are a set of behaviors, which, taken together, are a fair prescription for ostracism, bullying, or harassment at schools in many communities.

The interconnected effects of race, class, and gender also play an important role. As researcher Shanette Harris notes, “Although adolescents boys in general disparage feminine qualities, the intensity of this disdain appears to have a greater impact upon African American male youth.
“Unlike their European American counterparts, African American male adolescents are more likely to deny, devalue, and actually forgo intellectual interests to avoid the ridicule and shame that arise from academic success” [19].

As a young man explained in one study, “Absolutely I felt pressure to conform to images of masculinity in adolescence. I felt bad that I was reading or studying hard when all my peers where playing sports. I also felt bad about getting good grades because my peers looked down on me” [65].

School Disciplinary Systems

A wave of studies have established that educators are often reflexively inclined to view lower-income African American and Latino boys as potential troublemakers or even future felons [66].

Their response is increased surveillance, stricter regulation, and harsh punishment [67-69], including proactive efforts to separate difficult students from the school system.

Researcher Russell Skiba has conclusively demonstrated that urban Black and Latino middle-school males are punished more often, and more harshly, than their White and Asian-American peers, even for the same infractions [67].

Because of this, Zero Tolerance, Three Strikes, and other “school push-out” policies have tilted the playing field decisively against young men of color, making it more than ever likely that they will be suspended or even expelled. And, once suspended, it is much more probable that young men will never return or end up in juvenile detention or under the supervision of the justice system—part of the “School-to-Prison” pipeline. [70].

Indeed, Michelle Alexander has argued that legalized discrimination towards young Black felons exiting prisons and jails (denying the right to vote, public benefits, jury service, etc.) may amount to a “New Jim Crow”, in effect a nationwide caste system.

Rigid codes of urban masculinity can put young men directly at odds with school disciplinary regimes (which only increases their odds of ending up in the “School-to-Prison” pipeline).

Young men tend to establish status and dominance hierarchies through many of the behaviors—public boisterousness, risk-taking, defying adult authority figures, lack of engagement in academics, and suffering punishment silently—mostly likely to attract the attention of school authorities or increase their contact with juvenile justice systems.

By imposing the maximum penalty of expulsion, Zero Tolerance and Three Strikes policies offer young boys just learning to “do” masculinity precious little margin for error in navigating the twin shoals of adolescent manliness and school disciplinary regimes.

Taken together, these findings point to two great systems in blind and often disastrous collision: an urban male “gender culture” which demands that adolescent boys master public displays of traditional masculinity; and, school systems inclined to view precisely those displays as oppositional and threatening, a cause for constant surveillance and punishment, and markers of eventual failure and probable incarceration.

Even urban masculine fashion plays a role. A study perceptively titled “Tuck in That Shirt!” documented how hallway displays of contemporary urban manhood among young Black men—lowered and baggy pants, untucked shirts—had a profound impact on teachers. Educators—white and Black—immediately perceived the boys as oppositional and threatening, responding with more focus on bodily discipline, regulation, and punishment [1].
X. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Young Black men face many challenges, including having to navigate gender norms and race-based experiences that place them at risk for negative life outcomes.

Despite those risks, young Black men have shown significant levels of resilience in overcoming, surviving and in many instances thriving.

The purpose of this report is to highlight how greater attention to gender norms might help improve life outcomes for young Black men and boys, and to promote greater awareness among funders, advocate, service providers, and policy-makers.

Some consensus on areas to focus programmatic and philanthropic efforts include the following:

• More training is needed for youth providers and parents about the role of gender in the lives of young Black men.

• An online resource could be developed for parents, school personnel, and youth providers. The online resource could include brochures about the role of masculinity and manhood in the lives of young Black men. The site could also include tutorials and tool kits on how to support young Black men in development of more positive masculinities.

• A partnership could be developed with national organizations that work directly with young Black men. For example, a partnership could be established with the NAACP or National Urban League to train their local chapters about gender norms and tailoring gender-based curricula for young Black men.

• Model programs need to be developed that have tailored gender-based curricula focused on improving the overall health and well-being of young Black men.

• A national media campaign could be developed to address the issue of depression/mental health among young Black men. The campaign could focus on the negative impacts of the cultural expectation of young Black men to prioritize emotional toughness and not complaining at the expense of their own health. It could also address the effects of chronic stress and coping, and the need to ask for and accept the help of others.

• More programs that involve family members, including siblings, could be developed for young Black men (Murry et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2012). This would allow for the support of the extended family network, which is highly valued in the Black community. Funding support could be provided for existing family-based programs to be tailored, expanded and replicated across the country.

• Researchers, policymakers and stakeholders need to be encouraged more to address the needs of young Black men.

• A series of RFPs could be implemented that support empirical research focused on examining gender norms and their relationship to developmental outcomes among young Black men.

• A conference could be held to bring together policy-makers and stakeholders with key researchers to discuss how philanthropic goals can better address the needs of young Black men.

• Donors could be encouraged to conduct evaluation or TrueChild “Gender Audits”© of how their current portfolios and programs challenge gender norms that keep young Black men vulnerable to lower life outcomes, and move toward more gender-informed and truly “gender transformative” philanthropy.

Conclusion

This report has been offered as a snapshot of the huge impact the role gender norms play in the lives of men—and Black men and boys specifically. It has been able to provide broad strokes at best of very complex issues that often have historical and cultural roots. The literature is both wider and deeper than we have communicated.

With that said, we sincerely hope this paper is the beginning of a dialogue that can unpack, challenge and positively influence how gender is understood and enacted in the lives of young Black men.

Too many funding priorities, programs, and policies aimed at improving their life outcomes completely ignore the impact of rigid codes of masculinity and the deep need many young men of any race have to live up to and embody communal expectations of manhood.

The “gender vacuum” around young people of color in research, policy and programs that Hortensia Amaro spoke of almost two decades ago, should no longer exist.

Just like the dream deferred described by Langston Hughes, a dialog about young Black men that continues to be deferred will have significant negative consequences.

An intersectional understanding of gender, race, and class should be standard in social and philanthropic work if we seek to truly have a long standing impact on the life disparities among young Black men and boys. We truly still can no longer wait.