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A New Approach To Helping Men Of Color Heal After A Violent Incident

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To figure out the best ways to help young black and Latino men heal, a nonprofit will train young men in New York City to conduct interviews with other young men of color.

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Young black and Latino men are more likely than any other group to be the victims of violent crime, but American society has devoted too few resources to helping these young men heal after their violent encounters, according to researchers with New York City's Vera Institute of Justice.

The nonprofit, which works to improve justice systems around the country, is embarking on an ambitious federally-funded study to figure out the best ways to help young black and Latino men heal after violent events. To reach as many young men of color as possible, Vera's Center on Youth Justice is using an unusual corps of researchers: the young men themselves. The Institute is currently interviewing young men of color, age 18 to 24, from neighborhoods across the city to form an eight-man research team that will spend the next year conducting 150 interviews with other young men of color, age 18 to 24. The research team will even be involved in analyzing the data so the Vera Institute can publish the findings.

Ryan Shanahan, research director at the Center on Youth Justice, welcomes the initiative. "What we understand to be true from the research is that young men of color — black men — are at heightened risk for being victims of violence, especially robbery and physical assault," said Shanahan. "They are disproportionately exposed to violence and the negative consequences associated with victimization. But we don't have a lot of research about how they react to that and how they get help," she said. This information is especially important for service and healthcare providers who work with victims of violence, she said. "Without them knowing how to address the wants and needs of young men of color who have experienced harm, they are not going to be able to meet those needs for this population."

Among 10- to 24 year-olds, homicide is the leading cause of death for African-Americans and the second leading cause of death for Hispanics, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Of the 4,300 young people in the U.S. ages 10 to 24 who were victims of homicide in 2014 (an average of 12 a day), 86 percent (3,703) were male and 14 percent (597) were female. Shanahan said if the young men who are victims of violent encounters are given the help that will allow them to heal from trauma, the researchers believe those young men will become less likely to commit acts of violence themselves.

The working hypothesis is that the cycle of violence happens because hurt people hurt other people because they never heal, according to Shanahan. "And that perpetuates the cycle of violence in certain neighborhoods that are already under the weight of

systematic oppression around racism, that don't have as many recourses as other communities and that are being over-policed."

Saadq Bey, a research associate at the Center, said the eight-man research team, which is currently being formed, will come from all five boroughs in New York with a variety of educational backgrounds and encounters with violence themselves.

Other New York City organizations have previously undertaken similar studies.

Make It Happen, a Brooklyn-based program that is part of the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center, conducted its own study in 2012 to see how young men of color respond to traumatic incidents. The study grew out of the program's mission, which is to help young men between the ages of 16 and 24 who have experienced violence develop the tools to overcome traumatic incidents. The study found that this population relied heavily on their peers to help them process trauma, according to Kenton Kirby, director of Make It Happen.

"The challenge is a lot of the young men they're going to are also experiencing trauma themselves," said Kirby, a licensed social worker who has run the program for three years. "So you have this disconnect of what does the help or support look like when so many of the young men are experiencing traumatic incidents." He said that he and his staff are aware that traditional health services "have been oppressive to communities of color." Therefore, "We approach the work we do with young men from that lens, understanding that it's really important for us to build trust," he said.

Kirby said when his team is working with young men, the discussions often revolve around the question of how they define masculinity, which can get in the way of the healing process.

"Think about the messages they're getting from a young age. When you're learning how to walk and you fall, and you look like you're going to cry, most likely you hear from the people around you, 'Boy, don't cry. Get up, don't cry,'" Kirby said.

"So that's the first introduction to how you're supposed to have the emotional experience. It's either don't cry or you lash out. When there are actually so many more

layers to that. So these other emotions are viewed as weaknesses. People around us have been socialized to view us this way. Then add to it that many of them are living in communities below the poverty line. All of these layered issues get in the way of having that emotional experience they need to have."

Kirby said society's perceptions of black men keep them from getting the help they need.

"Historically, the narrative that's been out there for many years has been the scary black man, the angry black man, the man in the alley. That he doesn't have an emotional life," Kirby said. "That needs to change."

One study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* found that the stereotype of black men as threatening is so ingrained in the consciousness of white people that they react to a black male face with the same level of alarm that they react to spiders and snakes.

Growing up in New York City in the 1980's and 90's when the city was at the height of a crime wave, Kirby, who is 36 and African-American, said he had numerous violent encounters.

"I got jumped so many times!" he said. "I actually have a client who was jumped and it triggered in me, 'Oh my God, that's my experience.' My physical reaction in that moment allowed me to connect with him. I was able to validate his experience with my own experience. As a clinician you don't usually disclose, but in that moment to disclose benefited the client."

Vera Institute received a \$550,000 grant from the National Institute of Justice, part of the Department of Justice, during the Obama administration to study how young men of color are affected by violence. Shanahan said she believes they were chosen because of their unique idea to use the young men as the researchers. She said the long-term goal of the study is to give teenagers and their communities the tools to support victims of violence without the use of the criminal justice system, which she said "doesn't do a great job of either holding people totally accountable or allowing victims to heal."

Nick Chiles is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and three-time New York Times bestselling author. Follow him @nickwrite.

Correction

April 14, 2017

A previous version of this article incorrectly identified Ryan Shanahan as "he" when it should have been "she."

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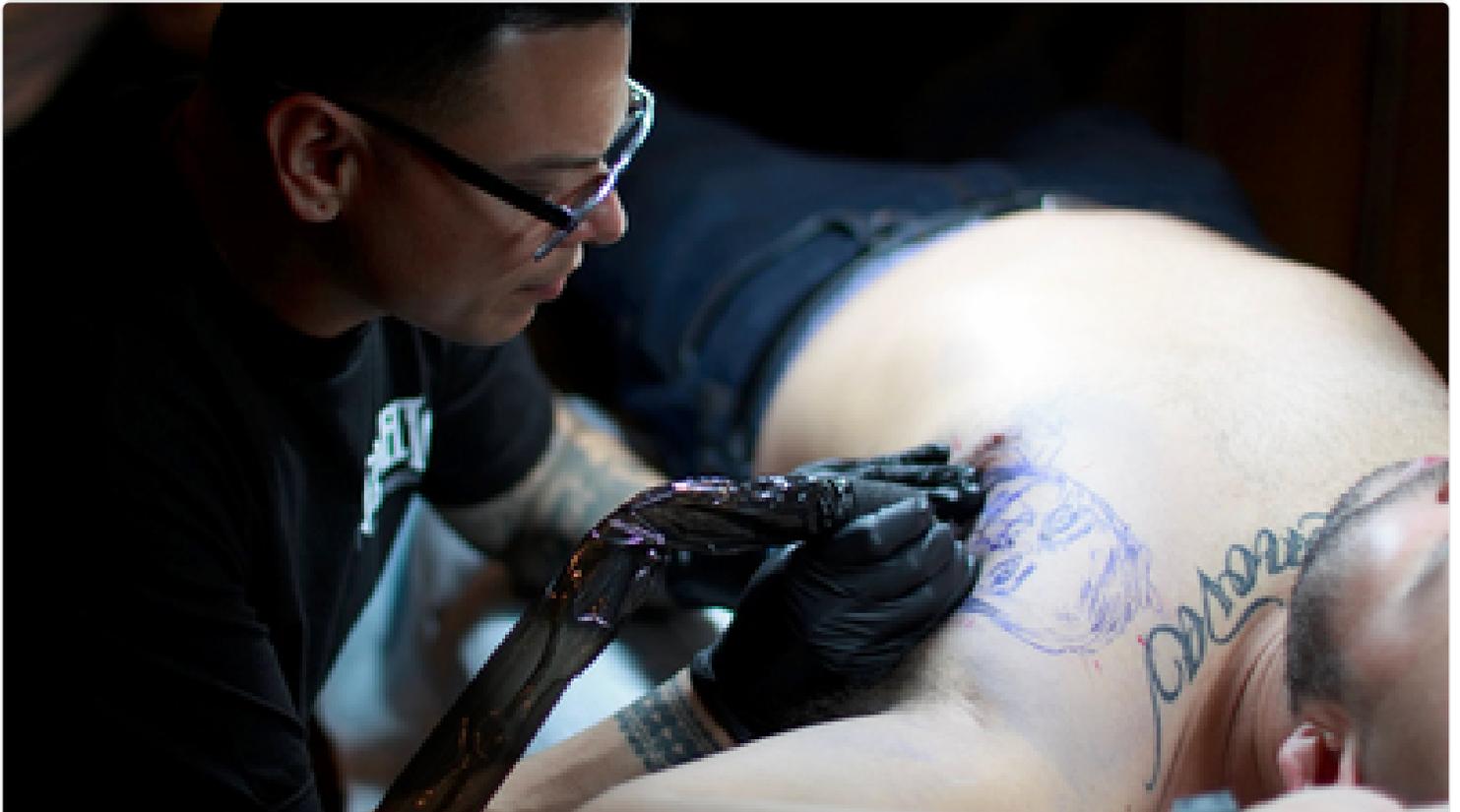
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