



Media Release

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New Report Details Living in “Survival Mode:” Why Some African Americans Thrive, While Others Merely Survive Emotional Challenges

(Philadelphia, PA) — In spite of their challenging environments and life situations, positive coping behaviors and protective factors may explain why some low-income urban youth who experience ongoing stress and trauma in their lives thrive, while others crumble, according to a new report released today by MEE (Motivational Educational Entertainment) Productions, Inc., in partnership with the Washington DC Department of Mental Health.

“Modern developmental neuroscience tells us teenagers are like cars with all ‘gasoline’ and no brakes,” said Dr. Carl Bell, a leading psychiatrist who served on the expert panel for the research. “Parents and society need to provide young people with ‘brakes and a steering wheel’— the protective factors they need to keep these teen risk factors from causing bad future outcomes.”

An extraordinarily frank report, *Moving Beyond Survival Mode: Promoting Mental Wellness and Resilience as a Way to Cope with Urban Trauma*, summarizes findings from 14 focus groups conducted with low-income Black mothers and young urban adults in four American cities in 2009. The report offers sobering insights on the stresses and traumas of unrelenting poverty and violence; what it’s like to live in “survival mode;” and the major barriers that inhibit access to community mental health services. A consortium of healthcare foundations, mental health agencies and violence-prevention organizations sponsored this research project and report.

“Because mental and emotional issues impact behaviors in so many areas—including, substance abuse, interpersonal violence and sexual health—this research is of direct relevance to a wide cross-section of organizations and agencies,” said MEE Founder and President Ivan Juzang. “It is critical to helping people think and talk about the issue of mental wellness in the Black community, and to helping create a common language and framework that can be used to educate the community on this issue.”

The report recommends intensive, sustained and culturally community outreach to engage African American families who are most at-risk. Mental health service providers need to build a bridge between their own professional knowledge and perspectives and an individual youth’s feelings, needs

and interests, by developing communications strategies that “meet people where they are.” At the same time, the report asserts, low-income African Americans need to understand that they have choices in the way they go about seeking mental wellness for themselves and their family. Finally, “Moving Beyond Survival Mode” calls for using protective factors as a framework that would lead a shift from mental health treatment as a focus of funding and programs to a prevention focus – one that helps “inoculate” young people against traumas they will face.

Key findings of the report include:

- **Stress and trauma are constants in the lives of today’s low-income, urban African Americans, and continue to take a devastating toll on their psyche.** Many causes of stress were named by the young people in this study, spanning a wide range of urban issues that make “just trying to live” a major challenge — from finding jobs, to interactions with the criminal justice system, to household/familial problems. Not having money and finding ways of acquiring it were enormous causes of stress for this segment of the American population. While young Black men spoke regularly about the trauma of surviving the streets, young Black women more often cited stressors related to interpersonal relationships
- **Positive coping behaviors and protective factors can act as a foundation for building toward increased resilience and mental wellness.** Young people said having internal goals and a strong support system, believing in a higher power (faith/spirituality), and being able to see beyond one’s immediate circumstances all help them “bounce back” from life’s challenges. By better understanding the positive coping mechanisms young people use to respond to stress, communities can help promote the prevention of mental illness and reinforce protective factors that help low-income Black youth thrive.
- **Stigma remains a major barrier to accessing community mental health services.** Young adults reported that people aren’t getting help for mental health issues because “*who wants to be viewed as crazy?*” Many believed that asking for help for an emotional problem is a sign of weakness. Other participants said some people are in denial about their own mental health issues, or that they aren’t seeking help for violence or depression because they consider the things around them to be “normal.”
- **A lack of diversity among mental health professionals is also contributing to under-use of behavioral health services and programs.** Participants consistently commented about not having mental health service providers who “look like them” and share their backgrounds and experiences. While providers in our focus groups pointed out that many of their mainstream peers try to be culturally sensitive, they said that they often fall short.

This two-year research project examined the mental and emotional needs that lead to disastrous choices and behavioral consequences among youth. The research design included expert interviews with top experts on psychology, mental health and urban youth issues; focus groups; and an extensive data coding process. At the project’s core, we collected qualitative data from low-income African American mothers/caregivers (ages 35+ who had adolescent sons ages 14-17) and from African-American young adults (ages 19-22, separated by gender), along with community-based service providers in four cities: Washington, DC; Oakland/Richmond, CA; Chicago, IL; and Philadelphia, PA.

The comprehensive MEE report is accompanied by a video documentary featuring excerpts from the focus groups and expert interviews. In addition, as a result of the findings in the report, MEE has developed a multi-component toolkit that includes the kind of culturally relevant materials that are needed in order to begin a community-wide dialogue with African American young adults and parents about the importance of mental wellness—and how to achieve it. It also provides CBOs, service providers, public agencies and institutions with methods (tools and communication strategies) to effectively address the identified provider-client cultural gap in the delivery of behavioral health services. Chicago and Philadelphia will serve as two of the first cities to implement some of the recommendations in the report, using the Community Mental Wellness Toolkit to inform the work of their behavioral health providers.

“*Moving Beyond Survival Mode* is critically important reading,” said Dr. Joe White, Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Psychiatry at University of California Irvine, and a nationally renowned expert on psychological trends within Black and urban communities. “The report hits all the major points with respect to coping strategies, community reluctance to use existing mental health resources, and the whole movement toward prevention and wellness, as opposed to illness.”

For more information:

To download the online press kit, including an overview outlining key findings and recommendations, go to www.meeproductions.com/PDF/mhmediakit.pdf.

About MEE and the Partnering Organization

MEE Productions Inc. (www.meeproductions.com) is an internationally recognized research, communications and marketing firm that develops research-based, market-driven solutions for issues facing urban and low-income populations living in at-risk environments. MEE specializes in developing cost-effective and culturally relevant messages for hard-to-reach urban and ethnic audiences. The company is headquartered in Philadelphia, with satellite offices in Washington DC and Los Angeles. MEE’s proprietary research methodologies, award-winning media productions and innovative campaigns are designed to meet the changing needs of underserved, low income and urban populations around the world.

For more than 30 years, the **Community Mental Health Council, Inc.** (CMHC), a multi-million dollar comprehensive community mental health center headquartered on Chicago’s South Side that has helped tens of thousands of individuals and families who struggle with the challenges of mental illness. CMHC focuses on placing clients and their families on a lifelong path to mental, emotional and physical wellness. The President and CEO is internationally renowned psychiatrist, author and educator, Carl C. Bell, M.D., who has conducted groundbreaking research that examines the effects of race, culture and ethnicity on behavioral healthcare issues. Dr. Bell is also Director of the Institute for Juvenile Research; Director of Public and Community Psychiatry; and Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Public Health at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Other sponsors included The California Endowment; the Division of Behavioral Health of the City of Philadelphia Department of Public Health; the Blueprint for a Safer Philadelphia; the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority; the Illinois Children’s Mental Health Partnership and MEE Productions Inc.

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