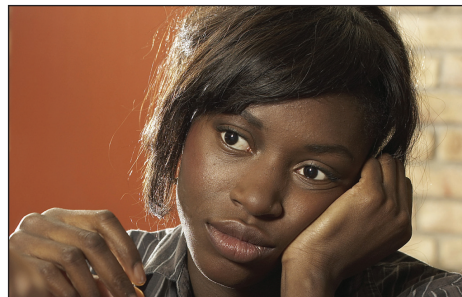


The Impact of Living in “Survival” Mode: MEE Research on Black Mental Wellness

MEE has conducted focus groups in some of the hardest-hit neighborhoods in America, from the South Side of Chicago to South Central LA, from North Philadelphia to Southeast DC, in post-Katrina Louisiana and more. For the past three years, MEE has also been a key social marketing partner in the innovative “Blueprint For A Safer Philadelphia” violence prevention initiative. Talking to people who live in these communities, one word comes up as a constant—stress (often preceded by violence or other trauma). Trying to make do with less, feeling that America has left no seat for you “at the table,” dealing with poverty and all the various “-isms” in our society...it all comes together to make for poor, Black people who are often angry, depressed or living in fear.

What so many underserved populations experience in their daily lives leads to stress, anxiety and even mental health problems. Though many people exposed to trauma may not fit a classic designation of “mentally ill,” they are emotionally injured, even from just feeling “beaten down” in the struggle to survive poverty, violent communities, poor schools, institutional racism and other social ills. People need many levels of emotional support; historically, too many of them have fallen “through the cracks.” Many who need help are opting out of seeking mental health support. In addition, family members and others around them, struggling too, often don’t recognize the signs and symptoms. Effectively reaching out to families who need prevention and treatment options most could mean the difference between success and failure for a generation of low-income residents.



MEE is now working on a new community-based participatory research project that can get people to start thinking and talking about the issue of mental wellness in the Black community. Without urgent action on a wide scale, mental illness will continue to be unknown, undiagnosed or misdiagnosed in poor Black communities.

MEE is conducting audience research African American parents/caregivers (ages 35+) and young adults (ages 19-22) and community-based service providers in four cities: Philadelphia, PA; Chicago, IL; Washington, DC; and Oakland/Richmond, CA. We have received funding support from The California Endowment, the Washington, DC Department of Mental Health and the City of Philadelphia’s Department of Behavioral Health Services to conduct a total of 16 focus groups.

Because the company prides itself on being socially responsible, it held a series of Chat & Chew information sessions to inform key stakeholders in each research community about this important research project. Our respect for community leaders led us to bring them to the table early on in the planning process, explaining our motives and getting their buy-in and “stamp of approval.”

We also promised to share what we learn, in order to improve the overall emotional and mental health of our community. Community leaders, colleagues, concerned citizens and outreach workers were invited to the sessions, based on the work they do or their personal interest in mental wellness in the African American community.

Because of MEE’s proprietary data collection and technology-driven coding and analysis methodology, we will be able to uncover what low-income African Americans feel about mental wellness. MEE will “get under the surface” of any negative myths or misconceptions about mental illness, explore the cultural and environmental realities that impact the decision-making process about seeking mental health services, and uncover the protective factors that may strengthen coping and survival strategies and prevent mental health issues.

We believe that what we will learn in our multi-city focus group research will help

Continued on page 5

What’s Inside

Male Mentoring as a Violence Prevention Strategy
... Page 2

Today’s Hip-Hop Generation Embraces Technology
... Page 3

Fighting for a Healthier Future
... Page 5

FromThePresident

With the new Administration in Washington, hope has resurfaced in America. Yet, in the hardest-hit, lowest-income communities, much work remains to be done. Change has not yet trickled down to the daily realities that make inner city living chronically stressful and often hopeless. The unemployment rate for Black people is five points higher than the rate for Americans as a whole. Violence continues to plague our streets and our homes.

In America's inner cities, hopelessness and resilience co-exist for Black people struggling to survive. Poverty, violence on the street and in our homes, broken families and other ills have taken an emotional, economic and spiritual toll on our minds and bodies. Trying to make do with less, feeling that America has left no seat for you "at the table," dealing with racism and other "-isms" in our society... it all comes together to make for people who are often angry or depressed. At the same time, creativity, faith and a determination to never quit have sustained generations of African Americans in this country.

Many of the institutions that are supposed to support and prepare Black children on the journey into adulthood have failed them—schools and the foster care and criminal justice systems, to name a few. As taxpayers and communities, we must hold these systems accountable. We must also rebuild the social fabric that has served as our safety net—so that we can provide a world that feels safe for every child, regardless of his or her birth circumstances. A coherent, comprehensive and culturally-relevant approach to preventing at-risk behaviors and enhancing inherent resilience will steer today's hip-hop generation towards making a positive contribution to our society. That will be *real* change in action.

Ivan Juzang, President
Pamela Weddington, Editor

Male Mentoring as a Violence Prevention Strategy

Young Black males clearly need help and firm guidance on the journey to a productive and happy manhood. It often seems that the deck is stacked against them; society has provided an extremely tricky road for them to navigate. They are inundated with negative influences, sometimes from inside their own homes, but for certain in the media, among some peers and in the streets. They get all kinds of messages about what it means to "be a man," such as always maintaining respect, being "tough" and in control. Boys watch their male relatives and the "old heads" in their neighborhood in their community to learn how they should handle themselves on the street, deal with women and conduct themselves in general. Too many confuse being a man with trying to be "The Man."

A deteriorated social fabric means there are too few male role models in Black homes. Many children are growing up without a father present—he is estranged from his children, incarcerated or lost to the streets. MEE's research shows that many mothers feel that a woman cannot give her son the full development that a man can give. The doctors, lawyers, teachers and postal workers have moved to "better" neighborhoods, leaving the drug dealers as the men in the neighborhood youth see with the cars, clothes, women and money. In addition, fewer grandparents are feeling equipped to step in and raise another generation of children, particularly with the challenges facing today's youth.

Many Black men already volunteer (formally or informally) or do community service, mostly through their affiliation with African American fraternities, churches, Boys & Girls Clubs or service organizations like 100 Black Men. Most men say that mentoring is important and of great benefit both to Black youth and to the African American community overall.

In MEE's years of formative audience

research on the subject of mentoring, Black men seem to have a broader definition of mentoring. To them, the concept includes any informal give-and-take that happens when they check up on the children in the neighborhood or give advice or positive feedback to a younger relative. Because in some Black communities, an educated, successful Black man is a scarce commodity, friends and family members often seek them out as a resource to help and guide the younger generation. Even men who tutored, taught or worked in youth programs said that a primary component of their work is mentoring the youth with whom they come in contact.

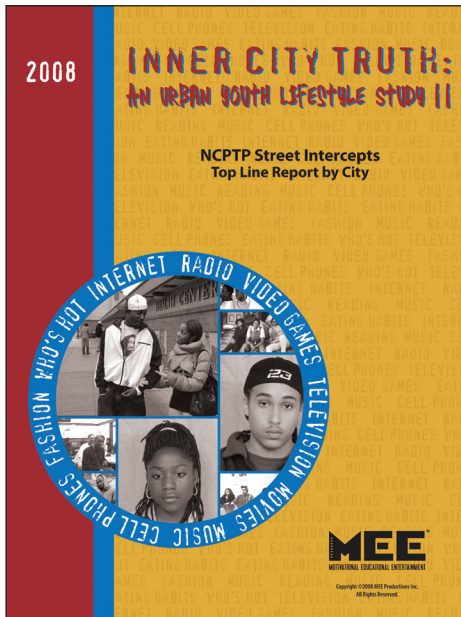
Even though "natural mentoring" seems to be happening fairly regularly, formal mentoring can have special benefits for young people. Many Black men have at least considered more formal mentoring relationships, but have not joined a program set up to pair them with a youth. Some men have wondered, for example, if they have "what it takes to be a good mentor," particularly less formally educated, blue-collar brothers who don't perceive themselves as having achieved "the American dream." Others would argue, however, that these Black men are perfect examples for young men because their lives more closely mirror the reality of those they are trying to reach and influence. They would also likely be better able to communicate and bond with these youth.

Many Black males who have thought about becoming a mentor cite the lack of free time as a problem. Many of them have children of their own who need plenty of mentoring and guidance; others are working long hours in order to make ends meet financially.

Mentors who are "walking the walk" can have a tremendous impact on a young mind. Without anyone guiding their moral development, young Black

Continued on page 5

Today's Hip Hop Generation is Highly-Connected, Tech Savvy and Brand Loyal



Despite what was believed by many, the overwhelming majority of low-income urban teens are accessing the Internet, buying the latest cell phones and engaging in online social networking. MEE uncovered this and other findings during its latest in a series of national surveys focused on the lifestyle trends, behaviors and attitudes of urban youth. *Inner City Truth: An Urban Youth Lifestyle Study II*, an insightful new report, was released in early February.

During four months in the summer of 2008, MEE conducted a national survey of more than 1,500 African American and Hispanic teens and young adults. The quantitative study maps out new and under-the-radar trends in inner city youth culture. The survey was administered in six markets: Philadelphia, PA; Washington, DC; New York, NY; Los Angeles/Long Beach, CA; Atlanta, GA; and Chicago, IL.

The survey findings provide a better understanding of the lifestyles, media consumption habits and behaviors of a typical inner-city youth. The report captures information about preferences and

consumption patterns related to entertainment media, the Internet and other communications technologies, along with demographic and psychographic data. It also shows where urban youth spend their time, their eating habits, their fashion preferences and who they think are the “hottest” celebrities.

The survey findings provide a better understanding of the lifestyles, media consumption habits and behaviors of a typical inner-city youth.

Anyone—in the public or private sectors—interested in reaching and influencing the behaviors, attitudes and spend-

ing patterns of the urban youth audience, will benefit from the quality and level of detail of this data. It will help providers understand how to better communicate with urban youth and to create messages and outreach that reflect their ideals, culture and environmental realities. A snapshot of the findings:

- 96% of youth reported having Internet access. However, only a little more than half of them used a home computer; others access the Internet at work, school or other locations.
- In 2002, 43% of African American youth had access to the Internet at home, compared to 58% in 2008.
- Personal communication and entertainment were the most prevalent reasons why urban youth access the Internet.
- More than 9 out of 10 (92%) urban youth own a cell phone.

This latest study was co-sponsored by Black Entertainment Television (BET) and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. For more information on the report, go to www.mee-productions.com/ICT/. 

2008

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Fighting for a Healthier Future: Using Social Justice Messages to Prevent Childhood Obesity

As part of our ongoing commitment to reducing health disparities, MEE is pleased to release a new report on a particularly important health issue—the rising childhood obesity rates in communities of color. The report, *Taking Action Against Childhood Obesity in Communities of Color*, along with an executive summary and DVD documentary, is now being made available to key stakeholders across the country, with a focus on Atlanta and Baltimore.

The report shares what MEE learned in an 18-month, grassroots information-gathering process. We brought together groups of African American parents and key stakeholders so that we could collectively begin to develop solutions that improve health outcomes in current and future generations of children. We invited the folks who work most closely for and with low income African American children to “be at the table” for a critically important conversation about their food and physical activity choices.

The report was developed for The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, one of the nation’s leaders in tackling childhood obesity. MEE has helped the Foundation explore ways to create and energize a new corps of “activists for health” in the most often overlooked and underserved communities.

The committed and credible community leadership exhibited by participants in this project and other members of the MEE

Community Network can be the spark that ignites positive change. We heard candid feedback from parents, service providers, educators and community leaders about the many challenges they face in taking on this epidemic. What clearly emerged from the focus groups, Chat & Chews and Community Leadership Forums MEE conducted for this project is the need to continue the discussion, and to broaden our scope beyond African Americans in Baltimore and Atlanta, to include communities of color across the country.


What we found during these lively and stimulating discussions is that much work remains to be done. The information in the *Taking Action* report provides the background and foundation for a deeper dialogue about how we can organize and mobilize ourselves in order to reverse the current trends. It is also critically important to start talking about the socioeconomic, environmental and policy barriers that make healthy lifestyle choices so difficult to start and sustain in lower-income communities.

We know that a healthier future for our children is possible when our community works together. Sharing information is an important first step, a key to engaging and mobilizing low-income communities to create positive change. Download the executive summary of the report at www.meeproductions.com/obesity.pdf.



Mental Wellness continued...


agencies, CBOs, churches, foundations and policymakers facilitate a much-needed dialogue with the broader community about the importance of urgent culturally-relevant mental health interventions, both for prevention and treatment. The research will also help service providers get a better understanding of the worldview of youth and families who require mental health support, and be prepared to more effectively conduct outreach and provide services to them.

Audience research will also provide a foundation for future communication initiatives targeting low-income communities, creating a community-wide dialogue about mental wellness and putting critical mental health information directly into the hands of the people who need it most. We will help communities apply this research by developing a toolkit to help CBOs conduct effective outreach for mental wellness promotion. 

Male Mentoring continued...

males are coming up with their own rules. Instead, Black youth can learn what respect really means by seeing how their mentors, who come from the same streets and neighborhoods, treat and interact with others. Black mentors can show young people that making it in mainstream America doesn’t mean that you “give up your Black card” or forget how to “keep it real.” Mentoring can actually be healing for both parties, because mentors and young men can fill the empty places in each other’s lives.

When it comes to dealing with the crisis of young Black males killing each other, the idea of mentoring has moved from nice to necessity. It is not a quick fix; nothing is. However, having mentors can inspire and motivate Black males not to drop out and to graduate from high school prepared for college or post-secondary training. Having mentors could mean that way fewer young brothers will end up ensnared in the criminal justice system. Mentors from the ‘hood can be positive examples of masculinity in action. They can show young men how to express their anger or frustration without using a fist or a gun or by engaging in some other self-destructive behavior. They can give “real world” examples of what they might say or do in confrontational situations and show them that the world and their ambitions can go far beyond the streets.

Black men, even those who are successful, are too often told that they have little to contribute. We must continue to look for program models that will attract men of action. Program outreach must be more aggressive and made relevant so that more Black men will be inspired to share their lives with a youth in their community. The question of why some Black males make it and why others succumb to the streets just may boil down to having a stable, caring adult who demonstrates faith in and helps steer and protect our youth along their journey. Finding more ways to create and build those relationships is an important step on the road to a safer African American community. 

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E-mail: UT@meeproductions.com

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