Barbershop program helps reduce violence in Philadelphia
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A coping-skills program with young Black men in Philadelphia barbershops helped reduce reported violent behavior for up to three months, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

The Shape Up: Barbers Building Better Brothers project included 618 young Black men who received free haircuts and stipends to participate in two hourlong sessions with barbers trained as health educators in 48 barbershops in Philadelphia. Half of the barbers were trained to deliver a violence reduction intervention while the other half focused on HIV/sexually transmitted disease reduction skills. The men (ages 18-24) were randomly assigned to either group, with both interventions including confidential questionnaires, personal discussions and iPad role-play activities.

The program is one of a growing set of such programs that are using barbershops and beauty salons to improve the health of members of the Black community. "Barbershops and beauty salons in the Black community have been sites of protest but also healing," said co-researcher Howard Stevenson, Ph.D., the Constance Clayton professor of urban education and African studies at the University of Pennsylvania. "Black men will share things in a barbershop they won't tell a therapist or a preacher. The stories they tell are very intimate and personal, and these are the places you want to be to help people deal with emotional and physical trauma."

The researchers worked with a local community advisory board to build trust and gain input about the violence retaliation reduction intervention, which was culturally tailored to focus on racial and gender identity by addressing racism, negative masculine identity stereotypes, violence and stress. The project included follow-up sessions with the participants at three months, six months and one year after the initial sessions. The research was published online in Psychology of Men and Masculinities.

Participants in the violence reduction group reported significantly fewer physical fights with strangers, partners and peers at the three-month interval, but not at six months or one year. Participants were more likely to report fewer physical fights if they were more aware of how Black men face heightened risks of violence, discrimination and financial hardship.

The researchers were surprised that the HIV/STD intervention control group had similar findings, with fewer reported fights at three months but not for longer periods. The research team believes the similar findings may have resulted because the reduction of both violence and risky sexual behavior require similar coping skills involving emotional regulation and behavioral restraint.

"These are relational dynamics about how you navigate stress, differences in opinion and your identity in relationships," Stevenson said. "It isn't that disparate to understand how to talk to your partner about sexual behavior from how to..."
negotiate [with] someone challenging your manhood. Stress management is key."

The researchers recommended ongoing and longer intervention sessions to provide more lasting impacts on violence reduction. Findings relating to any reduction in risky sexual behavior for the HIV/STD control group will be included in a later study, they said.

"We are interested in how you navigate the politics of violence that are brought on by the hostility of racism in our society," Stevenson said. "Barbers can help teach coping skills because they are invisible heroes who have done a lot to prevent violence and tragedy in the Black community, including through conversations with opposing gang members in the same barbershop."

Out of the 618 participants, 38% were employed, 48% had completed high school and 80% had a monthly income less than $851. The study included only heterosexual participants because funding from the National Institutes of Health was targeted toward heterosexual Black men, so the findings may not generalize to gay, nonbinary or transgender Black men.

Stevenson now wants to develop a broader community-based racial literacy program that involves training barbers and beauticians as health educators to partner with other community leaders such as local coaches, police officers, teachers and store owners.

Under pressure from the Black Lives Matter movement, politicians in many cities across the country are funding alternative violence reduction programs instead of relying solely on police. However, many of these programs neglect culturally responsive strategies and don't have reliable means of measuring their success or scientific evidence supporting them, Stevenson said.

"Black Lives Matter and anti-racism approaches are so important because they can add benefit to any evidence-based models that don't consider culture, race or the daily experiences of Black and brown people," Stevenson said. "The universal narratives


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