Issue Brief: Men and Boys

Overview

Contemporary mainstream hip-hop is a culture obsessed with hyper-masculinity and its corollary: male supremacy. Hyper-masculinity is a psychological term for the exaggeration of stereotypical male behavior, such as an emphasis on strength, aggression and virility. Absent from the one-dimensional picture mainstream hip-hop portrays are complex images of employment, community and civic participation, higher education, fatherhood and more abstract expressions of power outside of street culture.

Aggressive metaphors in mainstream rap lyrics sell records and can also be one element that helps make violent behavior seem normal and acceptable. At a time when young men and women are being hurt and killed daily by gun violence, many critics are looking closely at the increasing level of aggression in music.

According to Craig Watkins, a University of Texas researcher interviewed for the Washington Post's groundbreaking 2006 series titled "Being a Black Man," "When you look at American popular culture, it is really driven by hip-hop, and young African American men are the face of hip-hop." He goes on to note, "It speaks to the fear-fascination relationship the nation has with black men."

As a group, African American men and boys experience life in America in unique and often trying ways:

- There are 18 million African American men in America.
- According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, African American victimization rates in 2000 were 20 percent higher than those in the general population.
- Homicide rates are five times higher than that of the general population for several decades, and for African American males between the ages of 15 and 34, homicide is the primary cause of death.
- The percentage of African American men graduating from college has nearly quadrupled since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and yet more African American men earn their high school equivalency diplomas in prison each year than graduate from college.
- African American men are nine times as likely as Caucasian men to die from AIDS, and life expectancy for black men is 69.2 years—more than six years shorter than that of Caucasian men.
- Fewer than half of African American boys graduate from high school four years after entering the ninth grade.

- African American families where men are in the home earn median incomes that approach those of Caucasian families. Yet more than half of the nation's 5.6 million black boys live in fatherless households, 40 percent of which are impoverished.
- The ranks of professional African American men have exploded over four decades—there were 78,000 African American male engineers in 2004, a 33 percent increase in 10 years. And yet 840,000 African American men are incarcerated, and the chances of an African American boy serving time has nearly tripled in three decades, Justice Department projections show.

The construction of power attained through negative posturing and behavior warrants close examination. Spelman Professor and Essence Magazine contributing writer, Jelani Cobb posits that, "The reason why braggadocio and boast is so central to the history of hip-hop is because you're dealing with the history of black men in America. And there's a whole lineage of black men wanting to deny their own frailty. And so in some ways you have to do that… like a psychic armor… to walk out into the world everyday."

Many young black men feel under siege in their own communities and live in conditions not unlike a war zone. So the "psychic armor" that many adopt simply to survive often manifests into a culture of violence. Problems arise when the "psychic armor" transforms into a definition of what it is to be "cool."

Washington Post Staff Writer Donna Britt, examined coolness and masculinity for the Post's series Being a Black Man. In her ground-breaking article "The Hard Core of Cool," she notes, "Confidence is cool's most essential element. Perhaps that's why African American men—for whom the appearance of assurance can be a matter of life or death—so often radiate it. Cool is grace made masculine, the seamless melding of emotional authority with physical poise. It's so innately male that its association with African American men—whose masculinity and sexuality have for centuries inspired fear and fascination—seems inevitable."

Masculinity as defined through violence and aggression has a real impact on men and boys nation-wide. Consider the following statistics:

Incarceration

The disproportionate representation of African Americans in the U.S. criminal justice system is well documented.

- One in every 20 African American men over the age of 18 is in a state or federal prison, compared to one in every 180 whites.
- African Americans comprise 13 percent of the national population, but 30 percent of people arrested, 41 percent of people in jail, and 49 percent of those in prison. One in ten African American men in their twenties and early thirties is in prison or jail.
- Nine percent of all African American adults are under some form of correctional supervision (in jail or prison, on probation or parole), compared to two percent of white adults.
- Thirteen percent of the African American adult male population has lost the right to vote because of felony disenfranchisement laws.

Education vs. Incarceration

- Among African American high school dropouts in their late 20s, more are in prison on a given day (34 percent) than are working (30 percent) according to an analysis of 2000 census data by Steven Raphael of the University of California, Berkeley.
- Incarceration rates climbed in the 1990s and reached historic highs in the past few years. In 1995, 16 percent of African American men in their 20s who did not attend college were in jail or prison; by 2004, 21 percent were incarcerated. By their mid-30s, six in 10 African American men who had dropped out of school had spent time in prison. (Peter Edelman and Paul Offner, *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men*, Urban Institute Press, 2006).

Education and Employment

- In the inner cities, more than half of all African American men do not finish high school. (Peter Edelman and Paul Offner, *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men*, Urban Institute Press, 2006).
- In 2000, 65 percent of African American male high school dropouts in their 20s were jobless—that is, unable to find work, not seeking it or incarcerated. By 2004, the number had grown to 72 percent, compared with 34 percent of white and 19 percent of Hispanic dropouts.
- Even when high school graduates were included, half of African American men in their 20s were jobless in 2004, up from 46 percent in 2000. (Peter Edelman and Paul Offner, *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men*, Urban Institute Press, 2006).
- With the shift from factory jobs, unskilled workers of all races have lost ground, but none more so than African Americans. By 2004, 50 percent of African American men in their 20s who lacked a college education were jobless, as were 72 percent of high school dropouts, according to data compiled by Bruce Western, a sociologist at Princeton and author of the forthcoming book *Punishment and Inequality in America* (Russell Sage Press). These are more than double the rates for Caucasian and Hispanic men.

The Man Box

National organization A Call To Men authored the following chart, titled "The Man Box." It provides a useful discussion tool around definitions of masculinity and offers ways for men to create more positive models of manhood.

- Don't cry or openly express emotions with the exception of anger.
- Do not show weakness or fear.
- Demonstrate power and control especially over women.
- Aggression – Dominance
- Protector
- Do not be "like a woman."
- Heterosexual
- Do not be "like a gay man."
- Tough – Athletic – Strength – Courage

- Makes decisions
- Does not need help
- Views women as objects

Outside the Man Box

- Anything associated with being a woman
- Anything associated with being a gay man
- Sensitive
- Being vulnerable
- Being weak
- Showing emotion
- Will share remote control
- Will ask for directions

Traditional Male Socialization

- Creates violence against women and men
- Supports the power relationships over women
- Based on the belief of male supremacy and female inferiority
- Primary function is to maintain control over women (and submissive males)

How Men Can Become Part of the Solution

- Break out of the "the man box." Challenge those traditional images of manhood that stop us from actively taking a stance to end men's violence against women and to live individual and complex lives.
- Accept and own our responsibility that violence against women will not end until men become part of the solution to end it.
- Encourage young men to stay in school and help create systems of support for alienated youth and men.
- Prioritize the reform of the prison system to help keep families intact and teach job, fatherhood and life skills.

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