



Hypermasculinity and Mental Health: Stopping the Stigma for Low-Income Boys and Young Men

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Executive Summary

This policy memo addresses mental, emotional, and physical health disparities for boys and young men in low-income communities. Boys and young men are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem, insecurity, judgmental attitudes when it comes to self and others, and suicidal thoughts (Pappas). It addresses a framework for understanding the relationship between poverty and mental health, which draws together: a life course analysis; a discussion of the social determinants impacting mental health and poverty; the principles of equity and stigma of mental health; and the approaches of prevention, self-management, peer support, and community development. In order to address the issue of mental health disparities for low-income boys and young men, Congress should pass legislation that creates a grant program that funds community-based organizations in supporting the mental health needs of low-income boys and young men, implementing community therapy, and encouraging mental health awareness and education to combat stigma.

Problem Statement

Mental and emotional health for boys and young men in low-income communities is a critical issue. Many boys and young men do not know how to deal with difficult emotions in their daily lives, which can lead to hypermasculinity, violence, and substance abuse. There are many roots and impacts of the lack of mental health support for low-income men and boys. Many boys and young men avoid or do not have access to mental health care, so they self-medicate in order to deal with complex issues. For instance, many boys and young men use drug or alcohol to numb emotional

pain. Substance abuse and misuse have their own unique symptoms that often prevent boys and young men from functioning at work or school, maintaining a stable home life, handling life's difficulties, and relating to others. To make the situation more complicated is having a mental health problem go untreated, the substance abuse will most likely get worse and when alcohol or drug abuse increases, mental health problems often increase too (Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders). Substance abuse and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety are closely linked, but one does not directly cause the other. Alcohol and drugs are used to temporarily change boys and young men's moods not caring for what it can lead to in the future. This topic is very important not only for men but for the next generation to recognize that dealing with mental health helps boys and young men deal with and express certain problems that affect their daily lives.

Hypermasculinity is defined as a psychological term for the exaggeration of male stereotypical behavior, such as an emphasis on physical strength, aggression, and sexuality. Hypermasculine ideals, such as aggression and violence towards women and other men, become normalized and accepted. It also removes the responsibility from society and culture for creating and enforcing these ideals and chalks it up to "nature" for certain behaviors. This also plays a role in how boys figure out or think about what it is to be a man or the ideal of what a man is. Mentoring practitioner Dudley Sylla writes, "Hypermasculinity is especially dangerous if it is institutionalized (for example, rape culture or sexual harassment that is tolerated or hidden in organizations). Young men who identify with and conform to masculinity in a strict and rigid way are at risk of a variety of health effects including depression, sexual risk, and other health-risk behavior" (Sylla). When boys and young men develop, they live in a world where hypermasculinity is the norm and seen as positive, which prevents them from fully expressing themselves. In order to help boys and young men fully see themselves, institutions that support them like schools, youth development organizations, workplaces, must help them address their own masculinity individually and in relation to the people around them.

Dr. Wisdom Powell notes "In general, when men adhere rigidly to the kinds of norms that encourage them to not share their emotions, to be sort of relentlessly self-

reliant without seeking the help or support of others. They can have poorer mental health outcomes, particularly more depressive symptomatology because doing so cuts them off I think from the social networks and social supports that might help them get through a difficult time” (Powell). This is important because having a strong social network of people to rely on is important for any boy or young man to develop. Social support is very critical to combating physical and mental health stress (Ozbay). Social supports are a protective factor in developing mental and physical health issues. When people have strong social support, they are able to deal with stress better, the symptoms of some mental health disorders can decrease and it even decreases potential mortality. Social support means that every boy and young man has a web of people around them at school, at home, work and in their neighborhoods. People they can call upon when they need it.

Hypermasculinity can also be reflected in social media, as young men and boys are faced with impossible standards of masculinity. Attempts to deal with everything can be overwhelming, and deprioritized as non-essential. Due to hypermasculine stereotypes, boys and young men may fear being judged on social media. According to HelpGuide International, social media use may be problematic if it causes anxiety, anger, or depression. Social media shows the ideal and models the perfect lifestyle that individuals feel they need. Hypermasculinity in social media contributes to unique dangers for peer pressure for low-income boys in many communities. Often, low-income boys and young men will feel peer-pressured to join gangs, abuse alcohol and drugs or aspire to a certain social status because of social media.

When faced with hypermasculinity, peer pressure, and limited options for positive outlets, access to mental health support for young men and boys in low-income communities is further neglected, because often, such resources are not affordable. According to the Mental Health Foundation, “Poverty increases the risk of mental health problems and can be both a causal factor and a consequence of mental ill health. Mental health is shaped by the wide-ranging characteristics (including inequalities) of the social, economic and physical environments in which people live.” While the Children’s Health Act was signed into law in 2000, and reauthorize programs that work to improve mental health and substance abuse services for youth, there is still further

support that is needed to ensure that low-income boys and young men receive proper mental health services.

Successfully supporting the mental health and wellbeing of people living in poverty, and reducing the number of people with mental health problems experiencing poverty, requires engagement with this complexity. (Mental Health Foundation) Such issues in hyper-masculine culture, coupled with lack of financial resource, can manifest in increased violence, suicide, and abuse of drugs or alcohol. Statistically, “men commit 90 percent of homicides in the United States and represent 77 percent of homicide victims. They’re the demographic group most at risk of being victimized by violent crime” (Pappas). The reality is that addressing mental health and hypermasculinity is critical in order to prevent crime and murder. While these are extremes, data demonstrates that there is a larger unaddressed issue going on for boys and young men. It should also be noted that men “are 3.5 times more likely than women to die by suicide, and their life expectancy is 4.9 years shorter than women’s. Boys are far more likely to be diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder than girls, and they face harsher punishments in school—especially boys of color” (Pappas). There are many traumas that low-income boys and young men face that can lead to their attempting or committing suicide. There are many points when a young person’s mental health issues can be addressed, but since many boys and young men do not rely heavily on a social support network that can help, they navigate these challenges with little to no help. However, with targeted support and expanded resources there are ways to prevent social isolation, hypermasculinity and help boys and young men deal with their emotional and mental health.

Policy Recommendations

The goal of these policy recommendations is to provide community-led support for mental and emotional health. The policies will cover topics such as physical hygiene and health, positive coping tools, boundary setting, and how to ask for help. With these policies in place, low-income boys and young men can work to reduce anxiety, instill mindful thinking, improve interpersonal relationships, increase self-esteem, and reduce

the risk of depression. To achieve this, the following policy recommendations should be considered:

Recommendation 1

Congress should pass legislation that creates a grant program that funds community-based organizations that focus on the mental health needs of low-income boys and young men. The grant program should be administered through the U.S Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and will allow community-based non-profits to apply for funding to partner with mental health service providers to support low-income boys and young men to have access to therapy and youth development projects that help them cope with anxiety, stress, depression or other mental health issues.

Recommendation 2

Congress should pass legislation that creates a community therapy program for low-income boys and young men. The community therapy will consist of every city in the United States having a designated community-based mental health organization that works to conduct outreach to low-income boys and young men. A member of the staff will conduct such outreach by hosting public panels, connecting boys and young men to counseling sessions and group sessions in order to get the community involved. This will help the boys and young men figure what's important to them and speak up about mental health in their community and help shape the community for the next generation of boys and young men.

Recommendation 3

The Secretary of Health and Human Services should in coordination with advocacy, behavioral and mental health organizations serving boys and young men in low-income communities, develop and implement an outreach and education strategy to promote mental health and reduce stigma associated with mental health conditions and substance abuse among low-income boys and young men. The strategy should include a national awareness campaign, where ads

are placed on television, public transportation, community-based organization, schools, grocery stores and any other places that boys and young men go. This campaign should also include an awareness weekend which can be celebrated four times a year to recognize mental health and break the stigma for boys and young men in their communities. The national campaign would include a public event that invites mental health professionals, community advocates and boys and young men to talk about mental health issues on a national level. Communities throughout the nation could celebrate by hosting smaller events where boys and young men speak out publicly and encourage others to get involved, educate youth about their mental health, host a mental health resources fair and have guest speakers speak about experiences.

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