

Why Black Barbers Should Be Considered Essential Workers in America

“Hair is on the outside of a person, but there is so much more to our customers.... what someone shares in the chair, stays in the chair,” said one of 32 barbers interviewed by Harvard researchers between September and December 2020. The majority of participant barbers came via The Confess Project, America’s first barber mental health organization that redefines Black mental health culture to reduce shame and stigma.

Barbers were asked open-ended questions about their experiences and perspectives regarding mental health, community services, and racial issues. Harvard researchers endeavored to understand what role barbers played as mental health advocates, suicide prevention, and interpersonal gatekeepers in Black communities. Ultimately, the researchers hoped to identify new methods to reduce traumatic injury and death among Black male youth while sharing the work of barber gatekeepers.

From the ongoing pandemic to racial unrest, Black mental health initiatives are needed now more than ever during these extraordinarily chaotic and uncertain times. Tragically, Black boys between the ages of 5 and 12 have the [highest suicide rate](#) of any demographic. Additionally, the suicide rate among Black children under the age of 18 has increased by 71 percent since 2011.

Read below to learn why Black barbers are essential workers in America.

Barbershops are the backbone of Black communities

Countless barbershops nationwide provide free educational services, companionship for the elderly, and necessities by collecting food and goods. In fact, many of the barbers interviewed regularly volunteer at homeless shelters, mentor Black youth, and provide free haircuts to students and those in need.

Unlike other businesses, many barbershops open their doors to homeless individuals, elderly people, and veterans who may otherwise not have someone to keep them company. Additionally, the diverse and welcoming environment of barbershops provides opportunities for immigrants to practice English and increase their employment options.

Several barbers even described the barbershop as an alternative to church, especially when churches had to close during quarantine. Like in church, community members can come together in a barbershop for emotional, physical, and spiritual support.

Barbers provide mental health support for Black boys and men

One barber described how a longtime customer came into the shop displaying concerning non-verbal cues and acting unlike himself. Relying on his mental health training, the barber knew to avoid judgment, check in with his client, and listen empathetically. Eventually, his client confided in the barber that his life and marriage were in shambles. The client went on to say, “I don’t want to die, I just don’t want to live like this anymore.”

The barber not only listened attentively but also validated his feelings, recommended local mental health services, shared self-care techniques, and normalized being vulnerable. A few weeks later, the client returned with a positive attitude. Considering the risks Black people face during welfare checks by police, elevated suicide rates, and barriers to therapy, barbers are in a better position to reach and support Black boys and men during a mental health crisis.

Black barbers are doing their part to dismantle stigma within the Black community surrounding mental illness. For instance, barbers do not endorse praying away trauma or mental illness, and instead, explain to clients that religion and mental health care “can work together.” Additionally, barbers take away power from disparaging terms like “crazy” and use empowering language when speaking with clients.

Many barbers described sharing parts of themselves to support their clients. For instance, one barber shared that he uses medications to cope with anxiety and depression. By doing so, clients are able to know someone that looks like them who is receiving mental health treatment. As a result, mental health care becomes the norm and not the exception.

Barbers play a key role in preventing violence in Black communities

Black people living in America are 10 times more likely to be [killed by gun violence](#) and 15 times more likely to suffer gun assault injuries than their white counterparts.

In other words, being Black is a risk factor for being a victim of violence on any given day. Thankfully, many local barbershops provide a safe space for Black youth to escape gang violence and neighborhood feuds. Additionally, many barbers intervene to prevent an act of violence. Consider the following two examples.

One barber described a client confessing his plans to harm another man once he left the barbershop. The barber was able to persuade the client to not execute his plans by

providing sound advice and providing a space for the client to calm down. Similarly, another barber detailed a conversation he had with a female client who expressed wanting to attack her husband with a knife. This was the first time she had discussed her violent feelings and marital issues with another person. The barber provided her with resources and helped her realize she had peaceful options to resolve conflict with her husband.

From providing suicide resources to preventing domestic violence, barbers are undeniably saving lives across the country.

Black barbershops exemplify genuine allyship and solidarity. Harvard University merely confirmed what Black people have known for generations: Black barbers play an essential role in Black neighborhoods as change agents and gatekeepers for an array of community needs. This new study may help the rest of American society support the Black barber and appreciate mental health training. Or, at least those in America who truly believe that Black lives matter and are not hiding behind performative allyship.

Written by Priscilla Gutiérrez