

Barbers as Mental Health, Suicide Prevention, and Interpersonal Violence Gatekeepers in the Community:

Perspectives from People of Color in a Racially Divided America during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Traumatic injury is the number one cause of death for Black males under the age of 35. Interpersonal violence and suicide make up the vast majority of these occurrences. Barbers of color working in underserved communities throughout the United States are in a unique position as community gatekeepers to intervene and help prevent injury and death among Black males. In-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted with 32 men and women barbers of color who live in urban, suburban and rural locations throughout the United States, all of whom are currently or will soon be certified as mental health advocates in a program designed specifically for barbers. These open-ended and discursive discussions followed several themes including life as a barber, community interactions, mental health, suicide prevention, domestic and community violence, COVID-19, and racial tensions in America. Salient themes fell into seven major categories including: (a) barbers as a lifeline for the community, (b) barbers as mental health advocates & gatekeepers, (c) young Black and brown men in underserved communities, (d) barbers & COVID-19, (e) interpersonal violence, (f) women barbers, and (g) the community as a lifeline for barbers. Subthemes highlight the challenges and importance of supporting barbers of color in underserved communities through the United States.

Keywords: African American, barbers, barbershop, Black, COVID-19, gatekeepers, interpersonal violence, mental health, race

“The past year has been terribly damaging to our collective mental health. There is no vaccine for mental illness.”

— Michelle Williams, Dean of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (Powell, 2021, para. 6)

Introduction

Traumatic injury is the number one cause of death for Black males under the age of 35. For 15-34 year old Black males, firearm homicides made up over 90% of these incidents (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control [NCIPC], 2021a, Leading Causes of Death Reports, 2010-2018, Black, Males). The personal nature of these violent crimes is significant. According to Fowler et al. (2018), “Homicides primarily were precipitated by arguments and interpersonal conflicts, occurrence in conjunction with another crime, or related to intimate partner violence (particularly for females). When the relationship between a homicide victim and a suspected perpetrator was known, it was most often either an acquaintance/friend or an intimate partner” (p. 1). Traumatic injury incidents are often the result of cumulative factors, which may create space for observers to recognize signs of an impending disturbance and intervene at various stages. In such cases, traumatic injury and death may be avoided. This outcome is even more likely if observers have participated in relevant training and have the awareness, skills, and confidence to intercede. With the high levels of interpersonal violence among young Black males, greater community-based grassroots involvement and training may be an important step toward stemming violence in these communities. Further steps toward social justice reform are also needed to combat the structural racism plaguing communities of color.

It is important to note that these homicides can also produce a rippled effect and “foster an ongoing cycle of violence in the communities afflicted by this public health disease” (Frazer et al., 2018, p. 3). Violence begets violence, whether in the form of retaliation, preemptive strikes, or immediate responsive actions. As interpersonal violence is a community problem and can result in future crimes, a collective and proactive call to action is necessary.

Another kind of traumatic injury, suicide, ranks as the third and fourth cause of death among 15-24 and 25-34 year old Black males, respectively. The vast majority of these occurrences are caused by firearms and suffocation (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control [NCIPC], 2021a, Leading Causes of Death Reports, 2010-2018, Black, Males). Experiences with traumatic life events (e.g., ACEs) and poor environmental conditions can be attributed to some of these injuries and death. According to Sheats et al. (2018), “Data from BRFSS showed blacks (mean 2.16, 95% CI=1.97, 2.35) reported significantly higher levels of ACE exposure compared with whites (mean 1.82, 95% CI=1.76, 1.88; Table 2). The number of ACEs experienced was positively associated with self-rated fair to poor health, frequent mental distress, heavy drinking, and smoking for blacks and whites” (p. 465). With disproportionately high ACEs among young Black in underserved communities, associated risk factors can compound and carry over into bodily injury and/or death in the forms of both interpersonal violence and suicide.

More specifically, in regard to mental health, Williams (2018) explains how “acute life events (lifetime traumatic experiences and recent life events); childhood adversity; chronic stressors in relationships, finances, neighborhoods . . . found a graded association between the number of stressors and an increase in depressive symptoms” (p. 471). For Black males in underserved communities, a combination of various life stressors and events can indeed have a great impact on mental health, lead to feelings of depression or hopelessness, and even precede or be attributed to avoidable traumatic injury and death.

For Black and Hispanic communities in the United States, mental illnesses “tend to be more severe, persist for longer periods of time, and are more debilitating than for any other race or ethnic group (Williams, 2018, p. 466). Indeed, more needs to be done to overcome these racial disparities in regard to the intensity of mental health issues, which often become intergenerational in nature. Interventions come in many forms as community workers and researchers look for best practices to overcome these challenges and provide more acute support for these often-overlooked and underserved community members. The problem is dire. Solutions need to come from all corners of society, and new avenues of support need to be considered and invested in more heavily. There are no easy “fixes,” or even simply ways to understand such a complex challenge. Many underlying root causes exist. An interdisciplinary collective community approach is needed to find the most creative and inclusive means to tackle these disparities head on, and consequently, prevent more unconscionable traumatic injuries and deaths from occurring in the first place.

A Public Health Approach to Injury Prevention

A community-based public health approach to traumatic injury and death prevention describes among its main pillars a need for it to be “broad and inclusive — it examines all possible interventions, including changing social norms and passing new laws, and it tries to engage as many people and institutions as possible in a multifaceted way . . . emphasizing shared responsibility over blame. Prevention works best when everyone is trying to help” (Hemenway & Miller, 2013, p. 1). The social nature of community-based public health practices and programs is complex. Looking for new and innovative solutions by sharing ideas within and between various at-risk communities in the United States could be a pivotal way of moving forward, overcoming the disproportional rate of traumatic injury and death among young Black males, and altering its course toward a more positive trend. Researchers, community advocates, leaders in public health, government officials, local gatekeepers, and the general public all have a part to play.

As the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement gained momentum in 2019 and brought existing racial injustices, inequalities, and inequities into the national spotlight, people began putting “BLM” posters in their front lawns and storefronts across the country. These acts of solidarity to support Black lives continued into the 2020 national election cycle and continue to this day. However, visual and symbolic demonstrations such as these, as well-intentioned as they may be, aren’t enough to reduce traumatic injury and death among underserved Black communities in the United States. Tangible actions need to take hold to improve the quality of life for Black communities throughout the country. A proactive grassroots public health injury prevention approach may be one piece in a much bigger puzzle to create genuine and lasting change for overlooked Black communities.

Because of existing educational inequities, chronic health problems, well-founded mistrust of the health care sector and the persistent stigmas surrounding mental health services, Black people bear a large share of the burdens of income inequality, racial inequity, and community violence (Noonan et al., 2016; Pitre, 2014; Fripp & Carlson, 2017). The stigmatization of counseling services among men of color can often lead to an unwillingness to get professional help when they need it most (Ward et al., 2013; Lindsey et al., 2010). More stopgaps or trained gatekeepers who can change misconceptions about mental health and set good examples for at-risk members of the community are needed. They can help mitigate violent injuries and death by providing support to those who show signs of mental health distress (e.g., suicidal ideation, thoughts of violence toward others, etc.), and in certain cases, even gently guide them toward receiving professional care and support.

COVID-19’s Disproportional Impact on Black Communities amid Growing Racial Tensions

The aforementioned challenges are further exacerbated by another public health crisis—namely the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. As it spreads globally and impacts communities around the world in unprecedented ways, some groups fare better than others in combating the virus. Dr. Nadine Burke Harris (2020), California's first Surgeon General and a woman of color, offers a pertinent example: “‘What is it about Black and brown people’ that makes us more vulnerable to the virus? That question infuriates me. The science makes clear how powerfully our experiences and environments shape our biology . . . our daily experiences activate cascades of biological pathways” (para. 3). Combe (2020), who cites The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention further elaborates on the link between society and health by saying that the “long-standing systemic health and social inequities have put some members of racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk of getting COVID-19 or experiencing severe illness, regardless of age . . . non-Hispanic Black persons have a rate approximately 5 times that of non-Hispanic white persons” (p. 247). The Black community has indeed not only dealt with a higher rate of COVID-19 related sickness among their communities, but naturally, a higher rate of death as well (Scannell et al., 2020). No human has natural immunity to COVID-19, and certain factors like limited access to health care and/or a deep-seeded mistrust of health care professionals can couple with various economic disparities to further disproportionately impact the Black community.

Meanwhile, as COVID-19 vaccines are being approved and rolled out globally, communities are

beginning to inoculate themselves en masse. However, despite signs of light at the end of a very dark and treacherous tunnel, many Black people wonder whether or not they should receive newly developed vaccines in the first place. The CDC and government leaders promise safety and over 90% efficacy with the first two vaccines approved and administered to Americans (Zimmer, 2020), but similar promises have been made before and have historically led to devastating results. According to the Pew Research Center, “Black Americans continue to stand out as less inclined to get vaccinated than other racial and ethnic groups: 42% would do so, compared with 63% of Hispanic and 61% of White adults” (Funk & Tyson, 2020, para. 22). This is especially problematic as some epidemiologists are predicting that around 90% of the American population needs to be vaccinated in order to create herd immunity and bring the spread of the virus to a standstill (Weixel, 2020, para 1-5). And recent discussions about a possible need for booster shots as variants continue to develop with COVID-19 may further complicate a path toward herd immunity that already seems to be hitting one roadblock after another (Camero, 2021).

Indeed, skepticism runs deep among Black communities and doesn’t discriminate based upon one’s education level or zip code. Dr. Eugenia South, who currently works on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic fight and is an Assistant Professor at an Ivy League institution, describes her fear and hesitation about getting vaccinated despite being given access to the first wave of vaccinations: “I was decidedly and definitely against being among the first to get the shot. ‘I’m a Black doctor who didn’t trust the COVID vaccine’ ... How could a vaccine developed under a president who displayed repeated acts of racism and who actively enabled white supremacist groups be trusted?” (South, 2021, intro, para. 3, & para 4). Prior exploitation and unethical treatment of Black people within the American health care setting is another major reason for hesitancy over receiving a COVID-19 vaccination. Jones (1993) describes how uneasiness among Black people is a result of the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment. The aftermath of which spilled over into suspicions about the AIDs epidemic starting in the 1980s. Many Black people believed that AIDs was created to wipe out their communities (x). Such lingering mistrust of the U.S. government’s protection of the Black community continues today in both the private and public sectors with questions about the safety of new vaccines from private companies like Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna being called into question.

In the midst of this pandemic, racial tensions in the United States run high as the national conversation highlights the ways law enforcement agencies continue to cause the untimely and unjustified deaths of Black people in the United States. By now, thousands have taken to the streets protesting these injustices. National demonstrations and talk in the media about mistrust between the government and Black communities around the country sparked in a way that hasn’t been seen since the Civil Rights Movement. Boyd et al. (2020) describe this complex social landscape in the following way:

In the wake of the police killings of Elijah McClain, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Rayshard Brooks, the heart-wrenching public murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, and the premature and disproportionate deaths of tens of thousands of African Americans from COVID-19, our national racism bleeds anew, into the open, exposing the intersecting forms of violence that continue to threaten Black lives. In short, racism kills. Whether through force, deprivation, or discrimination, it is a fundamental cause of disease and the strange but familiar root of racial health inequities. (para. 2-3)

Indeed, these compounded challenges among Black communities call for a vast response from high-ranking leaders to local community leaders and their constituents. Meanwhile, racism only further complicates any top-down efforts to lower the rate of interpersonal violence and suicide among these communities. Now more than ever local gatekeepers are needed. They may be the best way to evoke true and lasting changes among embattled Black communities. Addressing existing inequalities in the United States needs to be a collective effort and one that considers a traumatic injury and death prevention public health model as a part of its arsenal for lasting systemic change.

Gatekeepers as Trusted Local Leaders & Pioneers of Grassroots Change

Gatekeepers are active members of society who are in a position to offer mental health support as well as aid in the prevention of suicide and interpersonal violence due to their high levels of personal contact with others. There is an abundance of research on gatekeepers in the health care (Chauliac et al., 2018; Ferguson et al., 2017; Nakagami et al., 2018; Siau et al., 2018), education (Lamis et al., 2017; Mo et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2017), and military professions (Comtois et al., 2019; VanSickle et al., 2016; Willmund et al., 2019). When they receive targeted training, such as in mental health advocacy, they may feel even more empowered to intervene and take the lead in supporting their respective communities (Terpstra et al., 2018). These trainings in mental health and interpersonal violence can come in many forms and cover a variety of topics and perspectives.

Gatekeepers are well-positioned to help those in the community forge new or previously broken relationships with government leaders, local officials, medical personnel, and even trained counselors or psychologists. Kayla Johnson, a staff psychologist who works for an institution of higher education, described the ongoing mistrust that some members of the Black community have with mental health professionals in a recent interview, saying “going to a therapist means that something must be wrong with you, or that you don’t have enough faith in God. There’s also pressure to keep problems to yourself . . . she said: ‘There’s kind of a level of secrecy about things that happen’” (Brown, 2020, para. 11). Gatekeepers, whom members of the community often seek out for advice or opinions, may be able to persuade certain at-risk community members to overcome these stigmas and misgivings and reconsider getting mental health services, which in some cases could prevent injury and death.

Considering these challenges, a more informal and casual setting such as a barbershop could serve as a key gateway component for helping marginalized Black community members overcome generations of stigma about these services. Through the lens of an injury prevention public health approach, any intervention which provides time and distance between someone attempting to commit suicide or hurt others, and hinders the means to do so, can mean the difference between life and death (Miller et al., 2012, p. 402-403). According to Deisenhammer et al. (2008), almost half of all suicides are decided within 10 minutes. And nearly three-quarters of people who attempted suicide and survived did not make a second attempt at their life (Owens et al., 2002). An accessible, non-judgmental, and personable gatekeeper may be able to provide a person with suicidal ideation or intent to cause harm to others support in their most dire moment of need.

Barbers of Color in Underserved Areas as Gatekeepers and Education/Community Leaders

Barbers serve as invaluable gatekeepers in communities throughout the United States because they are uniquely positioned to listen. Their customers, whom they often see on a regular basis, open up to them in their one-on-one interactions—from lighthearted to more serious topics, both of which are important and made possible in the safe spaces of many barbershops. Barbers also frequently interact with people outside of the shop who otherwise can’t afford or don’t have easy access to a haircut. They are the eyes and ears of the community. The barbershops themselves also act as invaluable nexus points where events such as Alcoholics Anonymous, community lectures, and food drives can take place. With training, barbers may learn to better recognize verbal and non-verbal cues or to discern particular changes in their customers’ lives (e.g., attitudes and behaviors) over time and then address any potential warning signs as they arise. This is particularly important because “the results suggest that, over time, black youth have experienced an increase in suicide attempts, which is troubling because attempts are the most prominent risk factor associated with suicide death” (Lindsey et al., 2019, p. 1).

One study that focused specifically on Black barbers in an urban area found that the vast majority of them felt that they could not influence the health-related decisions of their customers (Moore et al., 2016); however, other research shows that certain kinds of gatekeeper training can have the “potential to change participants’ knowledge and skills in suicide prevention (Mo et al, 2018, p. 1). Research efforts also need to be expanded to better understand gatekeepers’ thoughts and feelings regarding efforts toward a public health injury prevention approach. Survey-based studies can be useful in gaining overall opinions of barbers in the United States, but an interview-based approach may allow for a deeper investigation into

the thoughts and feelings of barbers in regards to their service to the community. Their grassroots mental health advocacy efforts, interventions with community and domestic violence, and pragmatic means of service go well beyond just cutting hair.

In a discussion with gun rights advocates and their opponents on the disproportionately high rate of suicide among citizens within the state of Utah, Sobelson Henn (n.d.) suggested that “suicide is where this bridge can actually be built” (para. 4). Indeed, this connection between suicide and interpersonal violence applies to underserved communities of color in the United States too. As tensions persist between macro and micro levels of society, we need to emphasize that these seemingly individual or personal tragedies are rather shared community problems, and treating them as such will allow us to take a much-needed step forward. Barbers as gatekeepers will be key for bringing about meaningful systemic change.

In fact, the proportion and severity of people impacted by suicide are found to be much more widespread than initially thought. This can have major implications for the role of barbers as gatekeepers in the community. Chauliac et al. (2016) found that “forty-eight percent of weighted participants (n5816/1,687) reported lifetime exposure to suicide. Current depression and anxiety symptoms were higher in suicide-exposed than in suicide-unexposed individuals. Suicide exposed individuals were twice as likely as suicide-unexposed individuals to have diagnosable depression and almost twice as likely to have diagnosable anxiety” (p. 100). With such sweeping implications, a program specifically designed to train Black and Brown barbers in mental health advocacy seems more pertinent than ever to overcome these complex situations. Even with just 1000 trained barbers, more than one million community members are directly reached each year (The Confess Project, personal communication, January 18, 2021), but even small steps are meaningful.

Barbershops can also aid in the prevention of retaliatory violence among young Black men by offering “culturally tailored” trainings (Baker et al., 2018), addressing intimate partner violence issues in ways that have been detailed in studies conducted in hair salons (Beebe et al., 2018), providing a frequently visited place to socialize, have conversations about local cultural happenings, and support community engagement and mental health (Roper & Barry, 2016), offering health-related barbershop workshops on HIV awareness (Wilson et al., 2014), and “reach[ing] populations most at risk for health disparities” (Linnan et al., 2014, p. 77). A collective public health injury prevention approach and greater support of barbers as trained gatekeepers could indeed become a game-changer in the fight against injury and death within underserved Black communities.

Limited Humanistic Research on the Role of Barbershops in Traumatic Injury Prevention

As mentioned above, several key themes within quantitative survey-based studies involving barbers, barbershops, and their customers look at issues related to mental/physical health and interpersonal violence—some of which consider traumatic injury prevention. However, many studies use barbershops simply as convenient places to recruit participants and miss the opportunity to dig deeper into their relationships within the community (Hart et al., 2009; Hood et al., 2012). There are many examples of popular articles that interview barbers and applaud their efforts in the community; however, this only seems to scratch the surface on the role that barbers play in preventing traumatic injury and death in their communities (Powell, 2020; Randle, 2020). Other research has examined the historical role of barbershops from the early 19th to the second half of the 20th century within the context of evolving freedoms and civil rights challenges for Black people. The goal of which is to provide a historical lens through which to better understand these occurrences (Mills, 2013).

Other qualitative and ethnographic based studies look more broadly with a sociological lens at the collective identity and meaning-making process of Black males in barbershops (Shabass, 2016) and even one international study looked at a similar process among men in Brazil (Dos Santos & Pereira, 2019). Another international study considered differences in formative communication patterns between Turkish barbershops and salons (Gokdag, 2016). Meanwhile, many humanistic or social science based studies on barbers limit themselves to urban areas and subsequently overlook a huge demographic of suburban and rural community barbershops throughout the United States, or look very narrowly at the effectiveness of specific interventions of barber trainings—often in the form of health educator analyses. But as Luque et

al. (2013) explains, even “these outcomes were variable and not consistently documented” (p. 181).

Main Research Aims

Using a humanistic and qualitative injury prevention approach to public health centered on the interpersonal violence and suicide epidemic among underserved Black communities in the United States, and more specifically with young men of color, the following study considers the following four research questions: (a) Within the current context of a global pandemic and amidst racial tensions in the United States, what role, if any, do barbers play as mental health advocates, suicide prevention, and interpersonal violence gatekeepers?, (b) how, if at all, does awareness of these issues, and/or trainings designed to address them, impact how barbers serve their communities, and when necessary, provide opportunities for necessary interventions, (c) how, if at all, have the barbers personal journeys influenced their work as gatekeepers and their service to greater community, and (d) in what way, if at all, do barbers think that people in other communities can actively support their work as gatekeepers as well as the most at-risk members of their communities?

METHOD

Design

This study conducts an interpretive examination of barbers’ past, present, and future lives in regard to their roles as valuable gatekeepers in underserved communities of color throughout the United States. It follows a qualitative research methodology that allows the researcher to make sense of the barbers’ individual experiences and look for shared themes among the participants. The study does not intend to propose generalizable causations as might be found in a more quantitative analysis. The study’s findings instead look at the unique and personal meaning-making processes of the 32 men and women barbers in this study. It hopes to as accurately as possible share their perspectives in their given urban, suburban, and rural locations which are located in various geographic spots throughout the United States. This humanistic research focuses on sharing the stories of the people interviewed in as representatively and accurately a way as possible by the author. Therefore, when necessary, member-checking was utilized with study participants to ensure accuracy.

Sample and Setting

A qualitative and humanistic research design

This kind of qualitative research intends to look into the lived experiences and day-to-day lives of people of color who work in American barbershops. It is “typically used for providing an in-depth understanding of the research issues that embrace the perspectives of the study population and the context in which they live . . . useful for exploring new topics or understanding complex issues; for explaining people’s beliefs and behaviour; and for identifying the social or cultural norms of a group or society” (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 11). More specifically, the PI used a phenomenological approach and conducted in-depth interviews with the goal of understanding the lived experiences of barbers recruited for this study. Seidman (2013) notes that this type of “in-depth interview approach includes primarily, but not exclusively, open-ended questions . . . to build upon and explore their participants’ responses to those questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study” (p.14).

Recruitment of participants

Recruitment methods included using a list of barbers provided by a mental health advocacy training program that had previously reached out to certified barbers to see who might be willing to participate in an IRB-approved university-affiliated interview research study. Of the 70 barbers contacted, 32 of the self-selected barbers were willing to conduct one-on-one interviews with the PI. All interviews were voluntary and in no way impacted their relationship with either their specific barbershops or involvement with the aforementioned mental health advocacy training program that they have or will soon will participate in.

Participant descriptions & interview process

Between September and December of 2020, the Principal Investigator (PI) conducted and recorded 32 one-on-one in-depth phone interviews ranging from roughly 30-90 minutes in length. They included 23 men and 9 women barbers of color and members of the Black community. Barbershops included rural, suburban, and urban locations in the U.S. states of Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, and Tennessee. Participants included a combination of shop owners, barbershop professors, and those who work for an employer's barbershop. All of the participants are certified barbers and have gone through extensive training to meet state and national guidelines. The vast majority of the barbers are also certified in a mental health advocacy training program that had taken place prior to the interview. The remaining barbers expressed an interest in mental health advocacy and in becoming program-certified in 2021.

The open-ended questions centered on several categories and questions investigating perceptions and experiences from barber's pasts, present work, and future thoughts on mental health and community service. These discursive yet interconnected discussions followed several themes including life as a barber, community interactions, mental health, suicide prevention, domestic and community violence, COVID-19, and racial tensions in America.

At the beginning of each interview, the barber read the entirety of the IRB-approved consent form. After giving verbal consent to proceed, barbers were asked a series of open-ended questions centering around the aforementioned themes. Barbers were encouraged to guide the conversations while the PI followed up from time to time with clarifying questions. Upon completion of the interviews, the barbers were sent cash payments of \$25 from the mental health advocacy training program as a way to thank them for their time. The sample size for this study is not significantly significant. It is understood that these interviews only scratch the surface on the thoughts, feeling, and experiences representative of barbers of color throughout the United States who come from an array of backgrounds. However, the limited number of interviews still provide key insights and were later inductively arranged into seven major salient theme findings. Subsequent findings fell into several categories including: (a) barbers as a lifeline for the community, (b) barbers as mental health advocates & gatekeepers, (c) young black and brown men in underserved communities, (d) barbers & COVID-19, (e) interpersonal violence, (f) women barbers, and (g) the community as a lifeline for barbers. Each theme includes several subthemes which highlight the challenges and importance of supporting barbers of color in underserved communities through the United States.

A sample of research study questions include: (1) What role, if any, do barber gatekeepers as suicide prevention mediators have in their local communities?, (2) how do barbers understand their roles as gatekeepers within communities of color?, (3) what particular challenges do their customers face in their daily lives?, (4) to what extent, if at all, do these challenges translate into suicidal ideation or professional counseling recommendations?, (5) how, if at all, has the COVID-19 global pandemic impacted the daily lives of people in their communities?, (6) how, if at all, have increased racial tensions in the United States influenced or exacerbated particular risk factors associated with suicide ideation?, (7) what else do barber gatekeepers want others to know about their experiences working to prevent suicide in their local communities? The following results and discussion section highlight leading themes from the barber interviews.

Data Accessibility, Storage, and Analysis

All audio recordings are only accessible by the PI to ensure participant confidentiality. Related data is stored in a password-protected, encrypted software. Unidentifiable notes were shared with the secondary author which did not include any personal identifiers to ensure participant anonymity. Some direct quotes are used from the participants; however, all identifiers are removed so that words cannot be connected to a particular participant and identities are kept safe at all times. Summations of quotes were sometimes used to share similar themes, examples, or sentiments expressed by the barbers.

Using an inductive approach (e.g., a bottom-up methodology allowing the barbers to guide the

topics/anecdotes most important to them), the recorded interviews were later transcribed and analyzed. Research notes taken during the interviews were also used to better understand the lived experiences of the barbers. Using MAXQDA and QDAS software programs, themes and patterns of thought emerged based upon frequency and were used in conjunction while relistening to audio recordings and following transcriptions. When necessary, member checking was conducted to ensure participants stories were being shared responsibly and with accuracy. This approach allowed for salient themes to emerge relevant to the study topics. The PI felt that after 32 in-depth interviews, which included nearly 24 hours of audio recordings, “saturation” had been reached as the data began to repeat itself in relatively high frequencies. Shared thoughts, opinions, and experiences form the basis of the findings and discussion sections of this study, but individual stories are sometimes shared to exemplify or highlight parts of particular themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Barbers as a Lifeline for The Community: “Problems go in the trash with the hair.”

Diversity of Customers & Ubiquity of Barbershops. In our modern society where device use and online interactions have become the new social norm, barbershops remain a rare place of physical interaction where people from all over the community can come together on a regular basis in an informal setting—with many waiting their turn to sit in the barber chair. “Everyone needs to get their hair done at some point,” remarked a barber interviewed for this study. Barbers of color interviewed mentioned that their shops don’t just include Black customers, but in reality, include a cornucopia of customers from an array of races, religions, and backgrounds. They enjoy seeing and understand the benefits of having their customers regularly interacting with one another, such as when they engage in playful banter, discuss life’s happenings, and sometimes even open up about more serious situations going on in their lives. A comforting atmosphere is found in most barbershops, and the lack of an institutional vibe such as one might find in a doctor’s office, creates an intimate environment that seems to draw customers back to the shops week-after-week.

The barbers from the study who work in more underserved areas mentioned that though places like local community churches have closed in recent years due to decreased levels of attendance and subsequent drops in tithings, the barbershop business has persisted. In part, they say, the barbershop has filled the void left by vacant churches and provided a place of physical, emotional, and social support. And while some other community gathering spots struggle to stay open, they remain a place to gather and offer both physical and spiritual renewal to members of the community.

The diversity of the shop is also global in nature and represents a nexus of community interactions. One Burmese barber who was hired in a predominately Black barbershop attracts recently arrived immigrants to the business. As they learn English together hanging around the shop at night when they finish their shifts, they are exposed to new cultures and can build contacts with “locals.” One barber described how this has made adjusting to their new lives in America a bit easier. At the same time, the barbers in this shop expressed the pleasure they get seeing the “locals” interact with these foreign customers and workers and how it seems to add a sort of enrichment to their lives.

In another case, a Spanish translator sits near the barber chair as a group of non-English speaking Latin American restaurant workers get their haircuts to keep up their appearances for work in the service industry. In fact, many barbers in this study showed great pride that their shops have such a diverse clientele and described their intentionality to make sure anyone from anywhere feels at home when they walk through the front door of the shop. They also see their businesses as a reflection or window into ever-changing local community cultures and enjoy reflecting on how “things are just different now” when comparing the present day to times of the past.

These diverse interactions are not just happening in a few remote corners of the country. They can be found almost anywhere in barbershops throughout the United States, as evidenced by the 32 barbers interviewed for this study. Aside from the more conspicuous locations on busy street corners with the iconic swirling red-white-and-blue barber poles, the barbers serve in urban and rural, midwestern and southern, small and large group settings. Some barbershops are located by elementary schools while others are by major research universities. They can be found next to cornfields, and inside of strip malls,

colleges, VA Hospitals, corporate centers, and sometimes even urban skyscrapers. Barbers and their shops are everywhere where community members can get access to them. This ubiquity puts barbers in a unique spot to be the eyes and ears of the community. It has been this way as long as anyone can remember. And just a single barber, who cuts thousands of heads per year, is in reality just one among a vast community of individuals and shops throughout the United States who have deep and personal shared contact with millions of people each year from every walk of life.

Listen, Listen, Listen. As barbers discussed the lack of resources that young Black men in their communities feel they have in getting mental health support, they also emphasized that the barber chair can become a powerful educational space and place of healing for these young men. “I offer a time to have a private one-on-one conversation with them whenever they need it. And whatever they say to me stays in the barber chair,” remarked one barber. In fact, many barbers said that they make sure their customers never feel judged but always respected. They see the same customers regularly, and in many cases, build lifelong connections with them from first haircuts as young boys to the haircut before they get married at the altar. At the same time, the barbers clearly acknowledge their shortcomings and emphasized their lack of formal education as career counselors or clinical psychologists. But that is not the point for them. Simply exposing their customers to the importance of positive mental health in their day-to-day lives, even when this means sometimes reaching out for more professional intervention, brings great satisfaction to the barbers.

In many cases, the barbers feel that they may be the only ones truly listening to their customers. Their words of support could even make the difference between someone living in isolation and possibly causing harm to themselves or others, or find another much more healthy and community-based “way out” to put their lives back in a positive direction. Several barbers explained how overcoming childhood traumas from their own lives allowed them to help other young men in the similar situations. They want to make sure they don’t feel that they are ever alone and never have to be. They share stories with their customers like how their high ACEs (e.g., one barber described being impacted by severe adverse childhood trauma growing up which has now left him with a 8/10 score) or unique upbringings made their lives a challenge from the start. In the latter example, one of the barbers was born in a prison and taken from his mother’s arms as an infant so she could finish serving her time. These stories left some of the barbers hurt and feeling alone or confused. But some of these barbers use their heart-wrenching stories to show how they have grown as men and now found ways to heal and become leaders in their local communities.

One of the golden rules that barbers learn during training and apprenticeship is to listen to their customers. This can refer to listening to how customers want their hair cut, how things are progressing as the actual haircut takes place, and expectations with the final product. But there is another deeper form of listening that many barbers do in the shop. The one-on-one physical and sometimes emotional connection that barbers have with their clients goes beyond the chair. “I really want to know how they’re doing! What’s really going on in their lives” is a sentiment expressed by most of the 32 barbers in this study.

Even after seeing many costumers regularly year after year, barbers make a point of staying receptive and creating an environment where they feel comfortable sharing anything going on in their lives, whether it be something lighthearted like their new favorite YouTube video, or something more serious, such as the details of a divorce settlement or pain felt from the recent death of a loved one because of Covid-19. This intentional openness and mindfulness, according to two barber college professors that I spoke with, is even introduced from the very start of a student’s training. They explain that being a barber is more than just cutting hair. “Hair is on the outside of a person, but there is so much more to our customers,” said one barber. While being open to forming a trusted bond with their customers, they also reassure them that this is not a place of judgement, because “what someone shares in the chair, stays in the chair.”

The barbers mentioned many times in the interviews how customers regularly tell them how few people ever take the time to really listen to them—whether it be family members, teachers, or employers. When they get to share their experiences in the chair, the barbers explain, they get a sense of validation—that

their story matters and things aren't always as bad as they sometimes seem.

One barber shared a story of a young Black boy who from the onset looked upset and unhappy to be getting his hair cut. The barber prodded a bit and tried to figure out what was wrong. The boy, who was reluctant to speak at first, eventually opened up and said that “my mom, friends, teachers . . . never listen to me. They just tell me what to do all the time.” The barber replied, “Ok, I’m here to listen. When you come to my shop that’s all I’ll do. Just listen.” After a few months of regular haircuts, his mother noticed a positive change in his attitude and demeanor. She finally asked the barber one day how he managed to break through to her son and help set him in a more positive direction. The barber said simply, “I just listen to him.” When asked what they talked about, the barber replied, “ask him yourself and you’ll be surprised what he has to say.”

Life-changing face-to-face discourse is taking place every day between barbers and their customers in communities around the country. “They come in broken, leave feeling fixed,” one barber explained. “Everybody goes through a hard time. An attentive and trained barber can be the difference between life and death,” said another. They don’t just want their clients to look good. But feel good too. And listening, according to the barbers, is a key starting element to creating change not just in the barber chair, but throughout an American society which is currently enduring so much right now.

The Barbershop as a Pragmatic Beacon of Light. Barbers do more than just listen from behind the chair. Upon completion of the interviews, a plethora of ideas about grassroots community service opportunities emerged. The barbers are constantly looking for ways that they can positively impact their local communities. As they regularly hear the array of challenges that their customers are going through, they feel a sense of obligation to do more outside of the shop. Their community members are hurting and they want to be a part of the solution, knowing that even the smallest gesture can put someone back on the right track. “Before social media, we were the influencers,” explains one barber, “we just want to do what’s right for the community.” Nearly all of the barbers mentioned constructive ways that they reach the underserved and at-risk members of their communities.

On days off, some barbers serve the homeless and at-risk youth with free cuts by creating makeshift barbershops on street corners. While they may have an otherwise general mistrust to outsiders, they willingly sit with the barbers as to not let a free cut with a professional barber go to waste. They do house calls to see elderly members of the community who rarely, if ever, leave their homes and have few people to talk to. They visit VA hospitals and give veterans a chance to share their life stories. A fresh new hair style is a good start to making someone feel good, but using that profession to become a shining light in the community has an even more profound impact they say.

In addition to more altruistic services outside of the shop, the barbers also frequently offer free haircuts to their customers on their biggest days for events like first dates, weddings, baptisms, pre-interview preparations and even when beginning a new job. Barbers offer free haircuts for a kid’s first day of school, when they make the honor role, and provide a safe social space for special needs children. They are also there, most days of the week, and hours of the day, often at night, to cry and pray with their customers when they are going through struggles—even stopping by and being fully welcomed despite not receiving a haircut. “The community sees the shops as refuge, a confessional, and just a place to see old friends,” clarified one barber.

Beyond haircuts, barbershops receive and donate masks during the Covid-19 pandemic, hold voter drives for local and national elections, build relationships with college students and Greek Life in developing joint service opportunities, host food drives, Alcoholics Anonymous and suicide prevention meetings and training seminars. They offer job training for those who were recently incarcerated and have few other places to turn. They hold bike and school supplies drives, host book giveaways, develop their own share-and-read in-store libraries, and create sports leagues for their customers and friends to meet one another and bond outside of the shop. One Black barber who serves in an underserved area commented, “Blood is on your hands if you don’t intervene, help change that person from the inside, and not just their outward appearance.”

Barbering is More Than a Job. It's a Ministry. Personal religious faith is often the reason many of the barbers interviewed for this study say they feel called to serve others. In multiple interviews, barbers mentioned giving out their personal cell phone numbers to customers in case they ever needed any help. They did not want them to be left alone in their darkest times of need. These after-hours accommodations to help others come naturally to them because of a “deeper mission to serve.”

One barber mentioned how a conversation in the barber chair turned into having his dinner with his customers at a nearby restaurant after he closed the shop for the night because the customer was going through a particularly hard time and had few people to talk to. The barber explained that “the chair is my pulpit, and I feel that I have something to share.” The idea of becoming a barber as a “calling” was common referred to in the interviews. As a reverend or priest might say that he comes from a long line of people in the ministry, so might a second or third generation barber utter the same phrase. For some of the barbers with an affinity for religion or a deep personal faith, always being there for their customers is more than a one-off kind of gesture.

Barbering as an act of ministry also comes into play as their customers move through some of life's most memorable milestones or tragedies. Getting a haircut before a wedding, baptism, funeral or graduation is common. For people of faith, a stop to the barbershop often precedes these major life events. One young man on his way to prison felt he needed to stop by the barbershop for a last nice cut before he was scheduled to serve time for several years. The barber said that he gave this young man in trouble more than a haircut. “I gave him hope that the next time he sees me, he'll be a stronger and wiser man . . . and I told him don't worry about paying, this one's on me,” he said.

Barbers as Mental Health Advocates & Gatekeepers: “Breaking the stigma.”

“Don't want to die, just don't want to live like this anymore” (Barber Interventions). The barbers in this study mentioned that there are three topics of conversation that they are taught and learn to avoid, namely that of politics, religion, and sports. These points of discussion can often be contentious and lead to destroying an otherwise peaceful or amicable atmosphere in the shop. With the wrong statement and subsequent argument, it could even mean losing return business. Instead the motto C.U.T. (Communicate, Understand, and Trust) stands as a more constructive benchmark and guide for conversation. This approach can sometimes even spur on heartfelt discussion between the barbers and their customers. “We learn to not judge the individual, but listen to them,” expressed one barber. In doing so, the topic of choice that a customer decides to introduce is often a good indicator about their state of mind and how “they've been doing recently.” And in a few occasions, conversations can even steer toward some very serious topics which highlight existing mental health struggles going on in the customers life.

A barber from this study provided an eye-opening anecdote which involved a longtime customer from the shop who entered one day not seeming like himself. After the typical greeting, the barber noticed that the body language of the customer exhibited some worrisome non-verbal cues. He could tell the man was in a negative state of mind. After quietly waiting his turn, the customer was invited over to the barber chair. The barber knew to trust his training and not jump to any judgements about the customer. Instead, he knew to be patient. After some time, the man confided in the barber that everything in his life just seemed problematic and destitute. Nothing seemed to be going well and it was impacting his relationship with his wife.

With supportive language and an attentive ear, the barber helped the man feel validated and met him where he was mentally and emotionally. “Life can be like this sometimes,” he said. After a bit of time went by, the man opened up further about his troubles while his negative body language loosened. “I don't want to die, I just don't want to live like this anymore,” expressed the customer. With this key phrase, the barber knew that interventions were needed.

The barber continued to listen attentively, knowing that there is a stigma surrounding mental health services in the Black community. “It is just not something people talk about and not always something that is readily available,” he explains, speaking about underserved community members throughout the United States. The barber continued telling the customers, “You're not alone, even though it feels like it

sometimes.” The customer said it felt good to get outside of his head for a bit and let it all out. The barber shared some self-care techniques that he regularly uses to keep himself from bottling things up inside and which help him keep a healthy state of mind.

He also made the customer aware of free mental health services that are available in the community. The barber normalized the use of such services and explained that even the best of us need a helping hand from time-to-time. The customer who already had his phone number, knew that he could reach out to him at any time, day or night. He could also just come into the shop whenever he wanted to just hang out—even if he wasn’t getting his hair cut.

A few weeks later, the customer returned to the shop with a glimmer of positivity about him. It didn’t take him more than a few seconds to begin his usual casual and fun banter with members of the barber shop, including the barber who had previously reassured him things were going to be OK. As the customer sat in his chair once again, they engaged in casual conversation just like in previous times. They didn’t talk specifically about what had happened before. They didn’t need to.

Targeted Barber Mental Health Training is a Game-Changer. Before learning about training specifically designed for barbers to become community mental health advocates, nearly all participants interviewed in this study didn’t fully understand the extent to which their words could impact individuals throughout their communities. Indeed, the targeted mental health training that they received or are currently in the process of receiving empowers them to address mental health concerns head-on. According to the barbers, awareness and completion of training provides them an extra level of confidence when engaging with customers who confide in them some of their most intimate life details—including struggles with mental health, apprehensions associated with major life decisions such as marriage and divorce, and anxiety surrounding the death of a loved one or pressures brought on by a global pandemic that exacerbate preexisting challenges in their lives.

Barbers are used to offering advice and going out of their way to help customers, but often doing so in a more heuristic manner in which they learn as they go and build off prior experiences. A nationwide resource network of mental health training is currently underway. Its continued growth and support according to barbers provides them hope that others will be able to join this network of likeminded individuals and do more to empower barbers and destigmatize mental health services among underserved communities of color. They explain that the lives of their brothers, cousins, fathers, friends, and even other community members around the country that they have never met are on the line.

According to barbers interviewed in more rural areas of the country, this kind of training is necessary to break long-standing community traditions and norms that are averse to talking about mental health issues. They explained that in these smaller communities it is common for people to be wrapped up in each other’s business. The last thing that somebody wants is to be labeled as “crazy” or “problematic.” However, they also recognized that most, if not all of us, know someone who has been impacted by mental health issues. But they suggest that maybe well-known and respected community gatekeepers such as barbers can slowly turn the tide in favor of seeing mental health issues as something to be talked about and not avoided. But at the same time, they know their limits and when to encourage customers to see clinically-trained mental health counselors or psychologists.

Many of the barbers in this study described how a “praying it away” mentality is no longer good enough for keeping community members safe and cared for in regards to dealing with mental health problems. Religion is indeed an important part of many of their lives and communities, but according to the barbers this doesn’t mean that training designed specifically to address mental health issues needs to be ignored. “They can work together,” explained one barber. Indeed buy-in from both barbers and community members throughout the country is key in the power of mental health services having a real widespread and lasting impact with often-overlooked young Black men. These trained barbers can offer information as well as assurances related to seeing a professionally-trained mental health specialist. As unaddressed mental health issues can translate into community and domestic violence as well as an increase in suicide rates in their communities, encouraging barbers to undertake such training could in some cases lead to a decrease in suicide and interpersonal violence in their respective communities.

Supporting Underappreciated & Overlooked Community Members. As barbers see customers regularly over long periods of time, and spend extensive one-on-one time together in physical proximity, there are some particularly underappreciated or overlooked subgroups of the community that benefit particularly from exchanges with barbers who are trained as mental health advocates.

Barbers shared stories of providing free haircuts at VA hospitals and having both active and retired members of the armed forces in their shops. Many veterans and active service members who have seen combat, bring home with them varying levels of traumatic injuries and emotional and psychological trauma from battle (i.e., PTSD). According to the barbers, they want all members of the community to feel at home in their shops. They understand that veterans and services members, like so many other often overlooked or underappreciated members of the community, may not be getting the mental health support services that they need. Barbers trained to deeply listen to their customers, and refer them to professional services when deemed necessary, could be the difference between living a quality life and one that continues in pain and isolation. It also helps them to readjust to “normal” life back in the U.S. In some cases, the life and death of their customers could be influenced by barbers taking the time to just listen to these veterans and showing them that they are loved and respected in the communities.

Customers experiencing homelessness have also found a welcome community in many barbershops. While other businesses block their entry, barbers often know them by name. Free haircuts, access to food, and a small stylish community willing to accept them keep some homeless individuals frequenting these barbershops. In many underserved communities of color, the number of people living below the poverty line according to the barbers is disproportionately high. Some of these people who don't have a place to call home, also struggle with persistent mental health challenges and often don't have an interest in getting or are unable to get professional help. This can also be true for young Black men who have taken to the streets because of the negative effects of opioid and alcohol addictions. These barbershop communities can provide both practical resources, realignment with how mental health is perceived, and a bridge for young homeless men to find resources for other health-related services such as AIDs testing and general health screenings. The barbers explained how they often see a connection between homelessness and mental health and how barbershops can help reach those individuals who may otherwise fall off the radar.

In a few cases, barbers serving as mental health advocates can have direct impacts on loose connections found in their shops. In one unfortunate example, a barber explained how a long term customer talked with him about how his brother was considering suicide. The barber gave the customer information to pass along to his brother but also took it a step further by asking for his phone number so that he could ask him to visit the shop. After giving him a phone call, the customer's brother refused to stop by but showed his appreciation nevertheless. Sadly, that same night the customer's brother hung himself and was later pronounced dead. The barber was shocked to hear of the news but was thankful that at least the man had one last chance to think over his unfortunate decision. The deceased man had continually refused all kinds of interventions for dealing with his mental health challenges, but the barber knows that in other cases his actions could have ended up saving a life.

Can Barbers Prevent Gun-Related Suicides & Violence by Encouraging the “Babysitting” of Firearms? During interviews with the barbers, the idea of “babysitting guns,” or temporarily removing guns from the home and having someone watch over them for individuals who were at-risk for using them when undergoing a mental health issue or problem in their personal life was introduced. As a means to prevent traumatic injury and death among members of their communities, the barbers found it interesting and likely that they could encourage customers in their shops, or people that these customers lived with, to remove a firearm from the home when certain situations arose. Since barbershops are places where people from all walks of life can informally share intimate details about their lives, this location could also be a convenient place to suggest interventions and discuss how to go about them safely, such as with babysitting guns.

They described how customers would likely not be comfortable bringing their gun to a location such as

a police station or gun shop as then they felt the entire community might learn too much about their personal business. However, just the knowledge of knowing that putting time and distance between an at-risk person and a firearm could be the difference between life or death encouraged them to consider share such ideas with their customers in the future. They felt that temporarily removing the means of harm was indeed a novel idea and not something that requires more work or effort to share with a customer.

This discussion on the babysitting of guns also helped them see that there are many other practical steps they can take to reduce suicide and interpersonal violence in their communities. These steps don't have to take more than a few words of encouragement and a limited knowledge about ways to prevent traumatic injury and death among their customers. In other words, they can act like the warning light in a car when a person has forgotten to put on their seatbelt, or like a text message reminder that it's time to do their annual medical screening. In some cases, simply sharing a useful YouTube video link with a customer about related interventions can go a long way in changing the culture surrounding discussing such issues and allow them to do their part in supporting the prevention of traumatic injury and death among their most at-risk customers. One participant likened this to getting people to go out and vote in the 2020 presidential election cycle. Broaching the topic and explaining how the actions of just one person can alter the course of other people's lives both near and far gave the barbers a deeper sense of empowerment, relevancy in the community, and drive to make the biggest impact that they can in their day-to-day lives.

Young Black and Brown Men in Underserved Communities: “When we make it, we all make it.” *Stigmas & Misconceptions Surrounding Mental Health.* Barbers in this study spoke about what they see as a lack of mental health awareness among young men of color in their shops and surrounding communities. One barber summed up this sentiment well when he said, “They don't think they need to talk to anybody about anything and just bottle it up.” Getting young Black and brown men to open up and talk about their personal lives is a major challenge, say barbers. Talking about personal problems is often considered to be a sign of weakness or a failure to be “masculine” enough to deal with life's issues on one's own. These attitudes toward mental health are a major roadblock in enacting vital positive change among this population.

In one instance, a barber spoke with a young Black man about the medications he himself needs to take to help him cope with anxiety and depression in his daily life. The barber noted that beginning treatment was indeed scary, but he now sees that sharing his story with others in his barber chair may help them overcome their own apprehensions about these forms of therapy. Barbers believe that this process of social-proofing medical help is perfectly suited to the barber chair.

In fact, nearly every barber in this study acknowledges that they have a cache of personal stories that they are willing to share with their customers about their past and/or ongoing personal mental health struggles. These stories can be about something they have or are personally overcoming, afflictions of a family member or loved one, and without giving away identifiers, sharing events from other customers' lives to help those in their chairs better understand what they are going through. “It's about coming full circle,” mentions one barber, as they describe the process they go through when they open up to their customers. These steps encourage personal healing while “spreading the love” to others. Openness and breaking stigmas regarding mental health, one customer at a time, is seen as one of the most rewarding parts of the job for some barbers. It takes their service to the community beyond the barber's chair and deep into the lives of others even after they leave the shop.

Overcoming the stigma surrounding mental health has been a rallying point for many communities, as mental health struggles don't discriminate among race, background or socioeconomic status. Those who start the difficult conversations about mental health awareness and suicide prevention say it fosters a sense of freedom and empowerment in themselves and in the community. To many, it's a reminder of the time when they themselves were that young person sitting in the barber's chair, listening to an adult mentor share their own story and accepting the resources offered to get a second chance at life.

Older Barbers Serving as Father Figures to Younger Men: Grooming the Next Generation. The barbers of color, both men and woman, who were interviewed for this study have overcome their share of

obstacles and are eager to share their experiences with the next generation, from developing careers and starting their own businesses, to learning how to foster and maintain healthy relationships with loved ones. They want others to learn from their mistakes as well as successes. They feel that young Black men respond positively to older members of the community being real with them.

Intergenerational trauma, first theorized in the 1960s, is the idea that trauma can pass from generation to generation. A 1988 study by Sigal et al. (1988) found that descendants of Holocaust survivors were overrepresented in psychiatric care by 300%, further supporting the idea that the trauma of a parent or grandparent can be passed down. Considering the more than two hundred years of slavery and subsequent Jim Crow policies and systemic racism aimed at Black Americans, this population has experienced more than its share of intergenerational trauma. Barbers of color are by no means naïve to the immense challenge this presents to the mental health of young Black individuals, but the sheer size of the hurdle is not a deterrent.

Many of the barbers interviewed for this study cited intergenerational trauma as the biggest challenge they're working to overcome in their own lives. Some of those interviewed said they've never met their fathers. One man grew up without either of his parents, having been born in a prison when his mother was incarcerated and subsequently raised by relatives. These personal traumas are inextricable from the larger systems of oppression that perpetuate trauma from father to son, mother to daughter. Having experienced this form of trauma themselves, these barbers feel driven to take an active role in mental health counseling in their communities to combat the effects of intergenerational trauma.

Intergenerational mentorship is one way they are trying break the cycle of trauma. In many of their young customers, these barbers see reminders of their own pasts or people they knew from childhood. "I made many decisions when I was young without thinking," remarked one barber. "Just did what I felt like. My dad was in prison. I was alone."

Barbershops are indeed intergenerational spaces where in-person, regular, and sincere interactions are taking place. They are spaces that do not require a smartphone or other modern devices for people to connect. They already offer what so many people crave in our globalized, twenty-first-century world, namely that of extended face-to-face human interactions—especially in the age of Covid-19. These barbers don't just want to pick up the pieces when the younger generations make mistakes, or give them their last haircut before they enter the prison system pipeline; instead, these barbers want these young men of color to thrive. Not only to find successful careers and relationships like they have, but far exceed anything that they themselves have accomplished. From their first haircut, they want to be there for them. For life.

Barbers often come from long lineages of family members in the same profession. "Yeah, my grandfather, my uncle and my cousins are all barbers," said one barber. "It just felt right." As they learn from each other's life lessons, they want to include others in that community. They want other young men to see how these fathers and sons are interacting with each other when they work side-by-side, watch how they talk to their wives when they visit the shop, and guide their children right before their eyes as they play nearby the barber's chair. One barbershop owner even allowed his daughter to start her own woman's hair braiding and clothing line business right in his shop so her could spend more time with her. "It is so great working with my daughter," he explained. "I teach her about business and how to interact with costumers." He knows that young Black men in the shop see these interactions and are exposed to what a healthy father-daughter relationship looks like. He hopes that they can learn from and maybe emulate one day the same type of relationship with their own children.

Two of the people in this study even have their own barber colleges. They work with young Black men and share their vast experiences with them about cutting hair, dealing with costumers, and serving people in the community. One of the owners described how a student of his one day barged into class looking to pick a fight with another student. The barber college owner asked to speak privately with him. Instead of judging him, or kicking him out of the school, he took the opportunity to listen to him. In a matter of minutes, the young man opened up to him, broke down into tears, and embraced the barbershop professor. The professor said that the student's tough persona was little more than a cover for pain that he was suffering as a result of prior trauma he had experienced. After a talk together, the young man returned to

class ready to work toward a profession that promised a better life for both him and his family.

Barbers Protecting Their Own Mental Health. With such a giving mindset, barbers have described the challenge and need to keep their own mental health status in-check. Various forms of self-care were described: (a) daily journaling, (b) meditating every morning in the shop to set the right atmosphere for the day, (c) seeing their own mental health counselors, (d) creating accountability groups with their coworkers to keep each other in check, and even (e) maintaining a healthy diet. They admit that sometimes their work is more emotionally and spiritually draining than they are prepared to handle. This is when they know it is best to take a step back or bring in more support. Such preemptive efforts are seen as personal awareness and strength rather than weakness. As one female barber explained, referring to airplane emergency directives, “you’ve got to put your own mask on first before helping others.”

Week in and week out, young Black men in underserved communities return to the barber’s chair to freshen up their haircuts. In a case when they may not have the resources to do so, barbers are happy to give it to them for free and use it as an opportunity to inject “love and encouragement in their lives.” As one barber put it, “We can all use a free cut once in a while.” When explaining the reaction from one young Black customer when he explained to the barber some recent troubles he had been going through but still had the means to pay for the cut, the young man replied, “Wait, what?! You ain’t gonna charge me. Why?” The barber, who learned that this young man had been going through a particularly tough time in school replied, “Don’t worry about it, it’s on me this time.” Naturally, this altruistic act doesn’t go unnoticed by the customer and the barbers said that they hope it makes the customer feel that somebody views them as more than simply what they can give or how they look on the outside. The barbers simply feel that paying it forward in this way fosters a sense of positivity in their own lives.

Barbers step up for those who don’t have a positive male role model at home. These older men are able to guide the younger generation through difficult periods in life. In many cases, young Black men in marginalized communities feel inspired by this mentorship and say they want to become barbers themselves one day. When they ask what it takes to become a barber, the reply is often the same, “well, why don’t you pick up your own pair of scissors and stop by the shop sometime so I can get you started?” The mentor’s role begins by building a young man’s self-esteem, it often quickly turns into teaching them ways to become financially self-supportive. Older male barbers shared several stories in this study of how just one positive male influence can forever change the direction of a life. One barber described how “a pair of scissors and a barber chair can begin the process of breaking generational curses in a young man’s life.” Instead of a 19 or 20 year old man wandering around aimlessly and getting into trouble because they don’t know where else to turn, they can see barbering as a path toward greater autonomy and even social mobility.

Barbershops as a Place of Critical Discourse for Black and Brown Men. More than listening and performing acts of service, these men and women barbers have expressed their desire to challenge young men of color to think critically about their lives and communities. Barbers are taught that they should avoid provocative topics like politics and sports with their customers. However, if the customer decides to open up a more serious conversation, they are not prone to avoid such an opportunity for constructive discourse. Having young men think through issues, and not just think, act, or vote according to the mainstream thinking is something the barbers are pressing for in their customers. “Just because he is Black, doesn’t mean you should vote for him. What does he stand for? What is he going to actually do for you?,” expressed one barber.

The barbershops are places where topics can be debated not only between the barber and the customer, but also with those who happen to be around the shop. It is a place to disseminate new ideas and challenge existing ones. Some barber shops even let community lectures take place there by setting up chairs for after hour meetings or on days the shop is closed. Mental health training sessions for fellow barbers, financial literacy courses, etc. can take place there. After these meetings, pamphlets and educational materials are often made available to the shop for others to see at a later time. Despite the rules of what to avoid, the barbershop provides a place for change, opportunity, and support, where even

the most difficult of topics such as AIDs, STIs, homelessness, and community crime are welcome.

Unlike institutions of higher education located near many of these barbershops—where people often expect these conversations to take place—the barbershop doesn't have the same imbalance of power that can be found between a student and professor. There aren't the same concerns about saying the wrong thing and upsetting a teacher and receiving a poor grade in retaliation. In fact, in the barbershop it is the customer who pays the barber. The barber's livelihood hangs on return customers and keeping them happy. Customers can leave anytime they want and choose never to come back. Despite this, the barbers in this study expressed the need for their shops to be places of critical discourse when the situation merits it.

Access to higher education has historically been inequitable for Black Americans. It still is today. While barbershops aren't a replacement for higher education in the academic sense, they may offer the types of life lessons that can't be learned in school. For example, barbershops located near universities offer spaces, for young Black men in particular, to see how those of a similar racial background live in other parts of the country. One Black college student customer who was from Connecticut but attended a major university in the Deep South discussed with the barber his shocked at seeing first-hand just how men of color in this part of the country were not treated with the same level of respect he had experienced in the Northeast. He said he'd heard stories of mistreatment of young Black men on the news and on social media but it was his first time feeling such discrimination firsthand. The barbershop was a place for him to open up about these discrepancies and talk about ways that they could collectively support one another. The barber explained that this young man's culture shock will be something he can learn from and carry with him for the rest of his life.

The barbershop can act as a place for young Black men from around the country to find commonality despite their diverse backgrounds, and encourage one another to stay positive. It can act as a place to find mentorship, gain access to reading and educational materials from a variety of courses, and see good examples of how to make "smart" decisions for one's life. In the context of the protests that took place around the country as a result of the police killings of several Black community members, these shops became places of critical conversation about the state of race relations in American and in the midst of the 2020 presidential and Senate/HOR elections. Barbershops can also serve as places to learn about financial literacy such as how to balance a checkbook and see new opportunities to make money. They are places to express fear and hurt when community violence occurs in their neighborhoods, and to discuss sociopolitical issues, such as how to respond to the removal of 60s and 70s-era statues in community squares or whether they should vote to remove the Confederate flag from public ceremonies, and so on. As one barber described it, the barbershop is the "Black person's country club . . . but no matter what profession you are in, you are welcome here."

Practical Ways Barbers Support Young Black and Brown Men in Underserved Communities. Barbers respond to multiple community needs, in addition to mental health support. One way they do this is by offering free haircuts. Barbers give free haircuts to young Black men in prisons and offer them a brief respite and feeling of hope in an otherwise dark moment. Other times, they might pick a different street corner and set up shop, or give out free haircuts to customers before their weddings, first job interviews, or before the first day of school. This impromptu act of service reaches those who might not otherwise enter their shops. They give free haircuts for good grades in school for kids who make the honor role, while other times intentionally messing them up for kids performing below expectations by giving them embarrassing "George Jetson haircuts."

In other cases, they run food drives in their shops for hungry community members who need a helping hand that also supports young men of color, connect college students with internship opportunities with fellow customers who might be able to help them out, a safe place when things back at home are inhospitable, and so on. Barbershops sometimes even offer scholarships to enter barber colleges so young Black men of color can have an opportunity to become financially stable and support their families. "To do it on their own and gain a sense of pride!" as one barber explained. Barbers help them think about and plan for retirement from an early age as well. And for a few of the barbers who were once incarcerated,

they openly share their life stories about life on the inside and how these young Black men can avoid the same fate.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, they encourage members of their communities to wear masks as they enter the shop. They help them see the need to abide by public health guidelines to keep themselves and their loved ones safe. Even just the act of a barber wearing a mask sets an example to those in the community who pass by the shop on their way to work or school. They also encourage them to become organ donors, as members of the Black community historically often carry a sense of caution in enrolling in such services (Salim et al., 2010). They can explain the importance of getting important vaccines, getting STI tested, and taking preventative steps toward injury and death.

Barbers & COVID-19. “We ARE Essential.”

“We ARE Essential.” From mid-March 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic began to close down businesses and schools around the United States. A national debate ensued about what constitutes an “essential worker.” Barbershops around the country were forced to close their shops to curb the spread of the airborne virus. Many barbers interviewed for this study felt abandoned and ignored by local, state, and national government leaders because they were simply told to close with little explanation. They felt underappreciated and silenced that they were not given voice to their concerns – including their financial, social, and emotional apprehensions. As some leaders labeled the businesses that some of them had started from scratch as “luxury services,” they were appalled. With everything they do to help their communities, they made a strong case of themselves as being “essential workers.”

As the interviewees enumerated the reasons for this claim, they cited their barber license training which took over a year to complete (e.g., roughly 1500 hours) and which includes periodic annual recertifications. Trainings which include extensive learning about sanitation (e.g., changing gloves for each customer, how to properly sanitize the shop, preventing cross contamination of pathogens, etc.) and personal grooming (i.e., an essential part of hygiene and prevention of disease transmission). Barbers also mentioned that because of their training, such as someone might expect from local police or fire personnel, they are in a powerful gatekeeper position to set a good public health example for their customers in the community. They feel they know how to run a safe shop and follow CDC guidelines. As many people in the communities of color are hesitant to trust government mandates about mask wearing, and even the true presence of the virus in their communities, barbers can set an example for others to follow because they have already spent years earning the trust of the community, unlike most government leaders, who few know and most believe are demanding unequivocal obedience to guidelines that seem to change day to day. Barbershops could have been one of the biggest public health advocates but instead they felt alienated.

One effect of the quarantines was increased time at home with family members, which in some cases could lead to an increase in domestic violence issues (Boserup et al., 2020; Campbell, 2020), especially given the absence of available safe spaces such as barbershops outside the home. Barbers weren’t able to be there to listen. They weren’t allowed to. As underserved communities of color already have limited mental health services for their communities, the “non-essential” barbers weren’t there to point people in the right direction who may have needed some sort of intervention. As schools went online, barbershops couldn’t do the same.

Barbers explained that in order to address the larger needs in society, the smaller ones need to be tackled first. COVID-19 has highlighted these challenges and amplified them. Barbershops offer free educational services, collect goods for food banks, companionship for elderly, and give free haircuts to those who can’t afford one to provide a feeling of normalcy and a fresh start. Again, as Black and brown communities of color question the efficacy and safety of a COVID-19 vaccine, it could be the barbershops who disseminate information, build trust in the community, get the word out that it is safe, and if necessary, and even become temporary vaccination sites. The barbers in this study feel government leaders just don’t understand the invaluable work they do in the community and are simply out of touch with their constituents. Barbershops in white neighborhoods are just places for hair cutting—they don’t serve the same functions as those in Black communities. As mentioned earlier, to reach 90% vaccination

rates in the United States and hope for herd immunity, the Black community is absolutely vital in reaching this ambitious benchmark.

As government leaders directed small businesses be closed, barbers watched those same leaders on their television screens sporting fresh haircuts telling others not to go to barbershops. “Wow, that politician on TV has a nice fresh cut,” said one barber. “There’s no way he did that himself.” As barbers saw clips on the news of people like House Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi getting private salon services in her home state of California, they felt betrayed that leaders were somehow exempt from the very guidelines that they were promoting to their constituents.

Subsequently, mistrust and skepticism only grew worse among these barbers and their leaders. The eyes and ears of some of America’s most underserved communities were told to ignore what they saw as an obvious hypocrisy of their leaders. As essential gatekeepers in the community, it was only a matter of time before they interacted with their costumers and expressed their frustrations when they reopened. Many hotels and restaurants continued to serve customers, NBA players continued to play, but they were left in the dark. They never received an apology or sympathy from their leaders. It was only months later that some of these same leaders were asking for their votes to lead. “It’s a major insult,” one participant succinctly responded, “and now they need us to trust them again and get vaccinated.”

Covid-19 as a Rallying Point Among Barbers and their Communities. The COVID-19 global pandemic has given barbers much needed time to reflect upon their lives amidst their normally very busy schedules. For some, it has helped them see for the first time how truly useful and essential they are in their communities. As barbershops closed, many knew they needed to stay connected to their customers. Aside from the more general social media posts on Facebook or uploading pictures on Instagram, some picked up their phones and called their customers. “We wanted to see how they were doing and if they was anything that we could do for them,” said one barber. They expressed the same kind of outreach to their fellow barbers. Used to working hours together in the shop, they kept one another abreast of their current affairs and shared news about when it might be OK for them to reopen. They built a new sense of comradery among some of them. They were going through something difficult and new. But they were going through it together.

As shops reopened, returning customers were thankful to have this shared space available to them again—albeit with new safety restrictions, of course. Things felt a little bit different in the shops as space capacity was limited and many barbershops removed walk-in options to keep the flow of traffic to a minimum. But they were together again, almost like in pre-pandemic times. A few customers, according to the barbers, did not return, having they succumbed to COVID-19. Others came in to get a fresh haircut before attending the funeral of a recent loved one in a community that has been disproportionately affected. The haircut was a chance to share grief and know someone was listening—somebody that was within arm’s reach in a new world where at least six feet of distance is the new norm. A short lived but humanistic touch in an otherwise cold and removed society as one might expect during a pandemic, a brief sense of normalcy that lasts long beyond the barber chair.

“Somebody is going to cut people’s hair. Shouldn’t it be someone trained in sanitation and who knows how to follow proper protocols,” remarked one barber. They feel a sense of service as they cut the hair and trim the beards of frontline workers such as nurses and doctors. They are cutting the hair and keeping safe the delivery drivers who are transporting important items such as medicine and food to people who can’t leave their homes. They cut the hair of first responders such as EMS drivers, and police officers. The barbers feel they are doing their part for the community. While they feel frustrated when they see government leaders denying having their own hair done professionally during the pandemic, in their own communities they feel a deep sense of pride when they see teachers and students returning to school with fresh haircuts. They hope this makes them feel normal again and that they remember they are all in this together.

Interpersonal Violence: “Barbershops are water on fire, not gasoline”

Barbers in a Unique Position to Recognize and Prevent Community Violence. A single barber gives

hundreds of cuts a month. Many of these customers come in regularly and have life-long relationships with their barbers while others are “walk-ins” who may see that barber just once. For returning customers, this barber may be the one who gave them their first haircut as a child, before their first date and before their wedding, and now the one who repeats this process with the customer’s son. In fact, barbers’ in-depth and wide-ranging interactions with people in the community make them invaluable gatekeepers in positions to spot and possibly even prevent a violent act occurring in their communities.

Several barbers described how at-risk Black youth who come into their shops are susceptible to community violence, whether in the form of gang violence, territorial feuds, or rival schools. In order to combat this, they volunteer at after-school programs to keep the youth off the streets and from interacting with people they know could cause them trouble. The barbers in this study have an earnest desire to see their young people succeed and thrive in life. They take the time to get to know the young people in their communities by inviting them to hang out at their shops. “Barbershops are water on fire, not gasoline,” said one barber for this study. “We want to spread positivity and love in the community.” Another barber said, “We like to get kids off unsafe streets and sometimes even offer free haircuts to get them here.”

In some cases, however, community violence may make its way into a shop. A Black barber who works in a predominately underserved community of color said a new walk-in to the shop seemed upset and disturbed from the moment he entered. The two barbers in the shop that day knew something was amiss. One of the barbers said he sat the man in his chair and did what he always did: “listen and be open.” As the man described some of the major life challenges he had been going through recently, his demeanor slowly became less agitated. The barber felt that a free haircut could go a long way with this man. The customer, who was shocked at the offer, showed his gratitude. He then went on to confess that he had actually entered the shop to rob it and possibly cause harm to the barber and his coworker inside. After he explained his intentions, he apologized, and thanked them for doing him such a great service that day.

“Black on Black crime is a real issue in our community,” remarked several barbers. “We are killing each other when we should be building each other up,” replied another. In another example, a barber said that a customer he often saw on Fridays entered the shop and just sat in the lobby for several hours. According to the barber, the man didn’t talk to anyone and let person after person pass him in line as he sat in the shop looking quite disturbed. Finally, he decided to get his hair done and confessed to the barber that he intended to do harm to another man in the community as soon as he left the shop. The barber talked about the ramifications of his intentions and how a single dispute could destroy the rest of his life. The man knew he just needed time in the shop to calm down and get sage advice from the barber that he had confided in during previous visits.

The barber’s chair serves as a confessional for past trauma and actions for both the barber and those who are in the shop. The sharing of stories is therapeutic and has the potential to set individuals on new paths, but it isn’t always enough to stem the underlying tide of violence in a community. One barber described a customer who knew he was being targeted for murder. The man did not want more professional help from people in law enforcement, so he decided to just lie low and hope things would cool off. Sadly, the barber said that about 10 minutes after the man left the shop he was killed by the very people he feared. This was a reminder to the barber and the community that violence runs deep.

A few barbers said that some people in the community who are dealing with some major life issues avoid seeing police officers or religious figures and instead prefer to talk to barbers. They see their shops as places to get their thoughts together and talk to someone who might be able to offer them advice without facing legal repercussions, or moral guilt about one’s thoughts or action. The barbershop can also act as a gateway for getting professional help when barbers know the situation is beyond their ability to help.

Barbers in this study described how violence begets violence—how one act can lead to cycles of violence that are hard to control once they get going. Overcoming such violence takes hard work and time for healing. It takes a team of advocates to intervene and break patterns of destruction and self-harm. The barbers believe they are an important part of this process and community team. “We are just trying to do our part,” one barber said.

Barbers in a Unique Position to Recognize and Prevent Domestic Violence. Barbers interviewed in this study also described several situations where issues of domestic violence in the home developed in part due to challenges such as financial problems, acts of infidelity, pending divorce, and child neglect. These customers felt that the barber shop was one of the few places that they could share their problems without being judged and where they would not have to go on an official record with a medical or legal professional (e.g., law enforcement, family lawyers, etc.). Some of the barbers described their shops as the first place in which people experiencing or provoking domestic violence brought up their problems. For the latter, the barbershop was as a place of confession and to attempt to set things right and keep them from spiraling out of control. In these cases, more official interventions could take place once the customer had had a chance to talk through their issues with someone before proceeding any further.

In one case, a woman brought her son to the shop for his haircut because her husband, who is also a customer of the shop, was unable to do so. After the boy's cut, the barber had a chance to talk with her as her son played in another corner of the shop. What began with a casual conversation, quickly turned into something more serious. The barber said she told him the following: "I have two kids with this man, and now I am pregnant with our third. I want to cut him with a knife." While not elaborating on why she felt this way, the barber knew that he had to intervene. He explained that her family needed her here and not in prison if she did something dangerous and rash to her husband. He helped her see that there were alternatives to retaliatory violence in the home and that it was good that she was telling somebody openly for the first time about her domestic problems. He provided her with information and resources to get professional help and she left the shop no longer feeling alone or without options to handle her situation. "I was glad to help that day and give her time to think," the barber said.

In another case, a customer told the barber that he had resorted to becoming physical with his wife due to frustrations he was undergoing in their domestic partnership. He didn't want to cause her harm but felt that she just wasn't listening to him. The barber approached the situation in a non-judgmental way and explained that there are avenues to get help and stop patterns of violence before they get worse. The customer was grateful for having a listening ear and for the professional resources that were referred to him.

In both cases, the gift and power of time allowed for the situation to resolve itself. The barbershop provided a place for things to cool down in the heat of the moment. Barbershops can indeed play a major interventional role in patterns of violence in the home. They can be places of openness and support, and even places that aid in the prevention of injury or death of individuals in the community.

Women Barbers: "It's a man's world, but it would be nothing without a woman in it."

Barbering in a Profession Dominated by Men—But That's Quickly Changing. The women barbers of color in this study explained the challenges of entering a profession dominated by men. When there are conventions, for example, checking out the latest product lines for men's hair grooming products and services can cause challenges for women who find it difficult to find information on events as well as invitations for these often closed-door meetings. According to a couple of the female barbers, there remains some skepticism about a woman's place in the barbershop, especially among some older male leaders in the industry. However, they explained how this is rapidly changing as a growing number of women entering the profession see the benefits of working for oneself as a contractor in an existing shop, or even opening up businesses within their local communities. They likened these evolving gender norms to other changes in service-oriented professions such as ride-sharing companies, like Uber and Lyft, where women can enjoy greater freedoms like choosing their own hours and days to work.

But more than just opportunity, they feel that they can become just as good or "maybe even better" than men at grooming hair. There are positive changes in the norms of women barbers in shops and communities around the country as they demonstrate the highest levels of respect for the profession by learning as many skills and accumulating as many practice hours as they can find. They say it is about perfecting their craft to show men that they are taking the long-standing male dominated profession seriously and that they shouldn't be seen as a threat; instead, their sharp haircuts and happy customers

should serve as an inspiration to men that barber, regardless of age or gender.

There is, of course, a stigma around women barbers held by some male customers. They question how well a woman can cut a man's hair. But these skeptics are pleasantly surprised when there is a seamless transition in quality of cut when they have a woman take care of their hair in the barbershop. Several male barbers who have females in the shop, both as workers and/or owners, explain the unexpected benefits of having a greater diversity of workers in the shop. They see greater accountability and caution from barbers when customers bring up conversations that could be deemed disrespectful of women, and a positive influence on matters of the heart when male customers are seeking advice about relationship issues regarding the daughters, girlfriends, wives and female coworkers in their lives. The majority of male coworkers are supportive of their presence in the shop and do everything they can to help them succeed, according to the female barbers. For female shop owners, they enjoy bringing in other female barbers and guiding them in a profession that has been dominated by males for centuries.

Female Barbers as Entrepreneurs. More and more women of color are entering barber colleges to become certified barbers. Some come to the profession having worked in beauty salons geared toward a female clientele. These women barbers feel a deep sense of empowerment and pride as they bridge the gender gap that many felt was previously insurmountable. According to the female barbers, the pay is often good and the job allows them greater flexibility at home and with their children. Barbering has also allowed many of these entrepreneurs the ability to pursue hobbies which in some cases turn into other sources of income that help them provide for their loved ones. Some examples include hair braiding businesses, clothing lines, and blogging. Even expanding their followings online on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat can bring in additional income as well as new customers.

Several women interviewed for this study own their own shops. Some of them worked for male-owned barbershops in the past, and with the guidance and support from their former bosses, took the leap to start their own businesses. "It's great," said one female barber. "I can move my business anywhere I need to go since everybody needs a haircut at some point." Another female barber, who also drives trucks around the country, is able to provide haircuts as truck stops for extra income. She explained that she can bring her barber business wherever she goes and that this allows not only extra income but a chance to keep her skillset sharp. It also allows her to take mental health training and reach those who otherwise spend most of their days and nights alone driving across the country.

In the case of single moms, while other professions limit their schedules with non-flexible hours, barbering offers that flexibility, and many barbers can even bring their kids to work with them. This allows their kids to see their mothers in a professional, leadership setting, interacting with diverse clientele. Additionally, several single mom barbers said they felt joy and pride seeing their children interact and learn from their customers, who include people from all walks of life such as clergy, teachers, lawyers, and doctors. In some capacity, the men who regularly come to the barbershop may also double as male role models for young children of single mothers.

Female barbers stress that those trailblazers currently bridging the gender gap in barbering and paving the way for future women to be barbers should not be forgotten. These women broke with the status quo and laid claim to a profession that has traditionally been denied them. The older women barbers mentioned that it brings them great joy knowing that their efforts over the last few decades have in some small way made it easier for women to enter the barber profession.

Female Barbers Teaching Young Black Men How to Communicate and Open Up. One of the key roles that women barbers play in the community is acting as positive influences on young men. "These guys just bottle everything up . . . sometimes it takes a female touch to get them to open up," expressed one female barber. Indeed, some of the barbers expressed that men just felt more comfortable talking to a woman about what is going on in their lives. They explained how sometimes the male customers had questions and needed advice about how to communicate better and build deeper relationships with their mothers, wives, and daughters. They just didn't know where to turn to get the advice that they think could

really make a difference.

The female barbers described how they enjoyed sharing a female perspective with these men and see “the light turn on” for some of them. One female barber gave her male customer the same advice that she got when she was being trained to become a barber: “Listen.” They also told the men how they like to be treated and that maybe the females in their lives might appreciate the same level of respect. In a sense, what starts with a physical haircut in the barber chair, evolves into a “real-life” practice session for these men where they could practice communicating with a female who doesn’t judge them and can provide real-time feedback.

These female barbers are setting a positive example of how they expect to be treated by their male customers, and they hope that this influences how the men treat other women in their lives. “I mean, he trusts me as I have a dangerous sharp instrument (i.e., scissors) around his head,” jokes one female barber, “it’s not surprising that he listens to what I have to say.” The men seem to enjoy being able to show vulnerability with the female barbers week after week and improve their communication methods.

The women barbers also mentioned that they sometimes ask their young Black customers who have families to bring their sons into the shop with them. These women believe that bringing a young son into the shop can function as a bonding moment between two generations—young boys get to see how their fathers interact with other adults, and in this case, toward other women outside of their household. The boys get to see and hear their fathers talk about their jobs, goals, fears, and emotions with these female barbers, which sets an example of positive, open, and respectful communication of one’s emotions. The communication pathway also enables the women to gain more insight into the particular struggles that their male counterparts face. The women barbers stated that hearing these open and honest accounts from their male customers has helped them to better understand the men in their own personal lives and male communication styles.

Female Barbers Positively Impacting Women, Children, and Members of the LGBTQ+ Community. In the same light, female barbers also get to interact with many mothers who bring their sons into the shop. Many mothers feel comfortable running short errands, knowing their sons are in good hands, and in other cases, the barbershop can become a place of rest, recuperation, and even refuge for some of mothers. In one case, a female barber noticed that a woman was in the shop long after her son had had his hair cut. She continued with several costumers, continued to notice something bothering the young woman. During a brief respite, the barber took time to speak with the lingering customer. During their conversation, the barber noticed bruises on the woman and had a chance to talk with her more about what was going on at home. The woman told the barber that she felt like this shop was a place of refuge for her, giving her a much-needed safe place away from home.

A few weeks later, when this same customer had visited the shop multiple times, her husband became suspicious about her whereabouts. When the man entered the shop where his wife supposedly was, the female barber owner intervened. Upon accusations from the husband, she assured him that she is welcome there anytime and that no male in the shop was pursuing or interested in her. The man was taken back by her strength and his wife felt empowered seeing another woman stand up to him. This interaction, according to the female customer, was a wake-up call for her to no longer tolerate the emotional and physical abuse she was accustomed to at home. The female customers appreciated seeing “a strong and independent” woman among a group of male coworkers in an environment which is predominately dominated by male clientele.

Another female barber owner shared a story of her experiences with raising a child with special needs. He had had trouble sitting still in a barber chair to the frustration of male barbers around the city. It was such a problem that she one day decided to take matters into her own hands and learn to cut hair herself. She pursued getting a barber’s license so that she could expand her services to reach other single mothers like herself who were in a similar predicament. She eventually became the barber known for cutting hair of special needs children in the community. While she said that many male barbers did not have the experience or knowhow interacting with this particular clientele, her business thrived because she continued to do what she knew best—making children with special needs feels comfortable and treating

them as if they were her own children.

One female barber who has adopted more than ten children and brought them up through the foster system, said she deeply appreciated those in the community who support her and her shop. She is a person who “has a lot of love to give” and those in the community have stood by her side and supported her helping others.

In another case, a female barber who frequently saw a young customer, explained that she often talked with him about his performance in school and the kinds of fun he had with friends on the weekends. However, one day he wanted to talk about another topic that was a bit more personal—namely that of his private dating life. The customer, who was also fairly open with his mom about most things, seemed unusually hesitant this time around. With reassurance of confidentiality from the barber, the young man explained that he found men attractive and liked one individual in particular, but didn’t think his mom could handle news that he was likely gay.

The female barber reassured the customer that as a fellow mom there is seldomly anything that she didn’t already know about her children. She further explained that having an open dialogue with his mom could indeed strengthen their relationship and provide him guidance. She let him know that he wasn’t alone and that his mom would continue to love him because he was her son. Barbershops are important places for supporting LGBTQ+ youth because confidentiality and lack of judgment can often be found in the barber chair.

The Community as a Lifeline for Barbers: “My shop helps me deal with depression and anxiety.”

Community Members Helping Barbers Keep Their Lives on Track. Even with all the work they do in the shops, the barbers interviewed in this study still find time to engage in an array of community volunteer opportunities outside of the barber shop. Many take on mentorship roles with young Black men in the community, offer free haircuts in nursing homes, homeless shelters, and at the VA. But the participants in this study made it clear that they are the ones who sometimes need extra support from the community to overcome some of life’s most challenging hurdles and stay on course.

“You never know what a barber is going through,” said one young Black barber. One of these areas is overcoming their own mental health struggles resulting from traumatic upbringings and events. Poverty, community violence, racist acts, the sudden death of a loved one, including those resulting from domestic violence or suicide, has in part led them to make some bad decisions and/or get involved with the wrong people. For several barbers, this led to mistakes that resulted in incarceration. As they went in and out of the prison system, they needed a way out and a community to be there for them when so many others had not been.

In other cases, the trauma that some of the barbers experienced led them toward other self-destructive behaviors and escapist behaviors such as drug abuse and alcoholism. Depression, anxiety, and financial instability often ensued. Barbershops have given them a respite from their personal challenges and an environment where they could be loved and supported, where they could become leaders and community advocates. The barbers believe that their communities have given them more than they could ever give back. “Being around others in such a friendly setting has been really good for me,” said one barber. “I can share my personal journey with others so that they know, and I know we are not alone.” It allows them to keep each other accountable and put them in a position to become their best selves and the most effective leaders in the community. It’s a chance to come full circle.

In one case, a Black customer with a young family who was normally very quiet and reserved opened up to a female barber about problems that he had been having at home with his wife. She had endured a particular mental health struggle for some years, and it was now putting a tremendous strain on their marriage. The female barber opened up to the customer that she has had the same mental health struggle since childhood and that a local counseling support service which she recently used helped her to face many of its biggest challenges. She provided the customer with literature that she had in the shop which helped point his wife in the right direction. Weeks later he returned to share his deepest appreciations for the materials and referral she had given him about a local medical professional. The man felt empowered that he was able to support his wife in a way that he would not have considered otherwise. He was truly

grateful to the female barber for opening up to him. “It helped me help my wife,” she quoted him as saying. The female barber said that this was therapeutic for her as well. It was a chance to think about how far she has come in her own life.

Many of the barbers in this study want to break the mental health stigmas that are often found in their communities. Their communities show them that their lived experiences and efforts to become leaders in the community are not for naught. As barbers open up to others about their mental health struggles, they get to hear an array of similar stories from other community members. It reminds them that they are not alone, and that mental health is a problem common throughout society, one that cannot be solved in isolation. They are the new generation of barbers keeping long-standing traditions alive while incorporating new mental health strategies into their practices. It’s something they hope to pass onto the next generation. The barbershop is just an extension of their homes.

Community Members Helping Barbers Overcome Unforeseen Hardships. Barbers are trained to listen to their customers. They need to be attentive to what style their customers want as well be receptive to how their mood and attitude has changed over the last several visits. This is part of their holistic approach to making the customers feel healthy and confident both inside and out. However, the barbers in this study mentioned that they are the ones who sometimes need an attentive ear. “I work long hours, sometimes seven days a week,” explained one barber, “I sometimes don’t get time to think about my own life.” When customers engage in a reflexive conversation with their barbers, or when both sides are engaged and impacted, it can have a profound impact on them. “When my customers listen to me, it is therapy for me,” explained another.

Sometimes that community support can come in the most unexpected forms when an unexpected hardship occurs. A female barber in this study talked about the challenges she faced after a group of rioters completely destroyed and ransacked her shop. They left little behind besides broken glass and torn dry wall. She was devastated. She understood that many people in the community were angered by the recent deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, but now her shop, which she, a Black woman serving a community of color, had built was destroyed. An elderly local woman in the community who lives primarily on her social security checks decided to intervene. “She stopped by one day after seeing the mess and told me she wanted to help. She gave me her entire check. I tried to refuse it, but she said you need this more than me right now.” This kind of heartfelt outpouring from community members left a lasting impression on this entrepreneurial woman of color in this underserved community. Others came by and helped her sweep up the debris. Within weeks she had gotten the shop open again and her customers returned in full to make sure she understand how she was such an important part of their community.

Barbers also own other side businesses in the community to support their lives as entrepreneurs. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of many shops around the country for weeks, and in some cases months, it was these other sources of income that enabled some of them to stay afloat. These businesses included selling hair products online, posting videos on YouTube, working in the automobile industry, and writing and streaming music. These avenues, made possible by both local and digital community members, provided them with income as they waited for government stimulus or for things to return to some kind of “normal.” In several cases, some customers even dropped off payments and tips for haircuts that they weren’t even receiving. They knew that the drop in steady income within the barbershops service sector could leave irreparable damage. And when some barbershops had to slightly increase their prices to make up for lost revenue, most customers didn’t think twice about it. “They knew things were tough,” said one barber. “They were happy to help.”

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

This study took an in-depth look at the lives of men and women barbers of color throughout the United States. As described earlier, the intent of this study is not meant to be generalizable to other barbers and their experiences. Instead, this study is meant to share the thoughts and lessons learned from a small group of community gatekeepers that have mainly been overlooked in the academic literature. The themes

described in this study centered on the topics of their lives as barbers, community interactions, mental health, suicide prevention, domestic and community violence, COVID-19, and racial tensions in America.

The limited number of interviewees in this study provides only a narrow view and should not be generalized to all barbers of color in the United States. Further studies need to be conducted that look at barbers from all socioeconomic backgrounds and at new perspectives and contextual situations. Studies that encourage a mixed methods approach may also offer deeper insight into both the macro and micro levels of the work and impact that barbers of color have on their often overlooked and forgotten communities throughout the United States. The top-down and bottom-up approaches act as sources of research triangulation that can deepen the analysis of such a study.

This study also considered barbers who are or will soon be trained at mental health advocates. This could provide a biased sample of participants who already express a desire to take extra steps to support their communities that cannot be extrapolated to the general population of barbers. Again, future studies should consider larger sample sizes and varied research methods and populations to better understand the impact that barbers of color are having on their local communities. As Hemenway (2010) explains, “It is important to recognize that no single piece of research is definitive. Only the cumulative effort of many studies leads to increased knowledge and understanding of the real world. Each study has limitations” (XIII).

CONCLUSION

This article examines the lives of barbers of color in various American barbershops and focuses on several major themes including life as a barber, community interactions, mental health, suicide prevention, domestic and community violence, COVID-19, and racial tensions in America. The goal is to consider new ways to reduce traumatic injury and death among young Black men while also sharing the stories and work of barber gatekeepers who are making a major impact on their communities each and every day. Following many hours of interviews, the prescribed themes pursued with open-ended questions in an inductive manner led to findings that can be categorized in the following ways: (a) barbers as a lifeline for the community, (b) barbers as mental health advocates & gatekeepers, (c) young Black and brown men in underserved communities, (d) barbers & COVID-19, (e) interpersonal violence, (f) women barbers, and (g) the community as a lifeline for barbers. Each of these major themes include subthemes that provide supporting examples and anecdotes about the work of community barbers in supporting the lives of Black young men and others in their respective communities.

As essential gatekeepers, these studies show the importance of recognizing barbers’ roles in the community and the power that mental health training can have on these individuals and their surroundings. This article also shows that more research needs to be conducted with barbers of color in underserved communities, since they seem to be a much-needed link to overcome mistrust and brokenness both within their communities and within the nation as a whole. As a new American president calls for great unity and reconciliation in the United States, and amid global pandemic uncertainty and economic instability, barbers function as a key community liaisons to help rubber meet the road in terms of creating lasting and genuine racial change. To ignore the underserved is to reinforce a narrative that has for far too long marginalized certain groups—but not at the expense of others. Barbers can engage communities at their grassroots levels and provide an important piece to a puzzle that in some cases can mean the difference between life and death. What we need now is deep systemic change, not the mere appearance of allyship.

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Disclosure. Justin Adam Gelzhiser, PhD (PI) has no relevant financial interest or affiliations with any commercial interests related to the subjects discussed within this article. Mr. Lorenzo Lewis is the founder of The Confess Project which is a mental health advocacy training program intended for barbers of color around the United States. The goal of the Confess Project is to encourage cultural dialogue of African American males and speaking about emotional health.

Acknowledgments. Justin Adam Gelzhiser would like to thank The Gillian Reny Stepping Strong Center for Trauma Innovation and The Harvard Injury Control Research Center for their invaluable guidance and feedback with this article.

Mr. Lorenzo P. Lewis, is truly inspired and in gratitude to thank his Aunt Daisy Lee who owned Unique Hair Fashions over two decades ago. This is the place in which he was able to learn how powerful and transformational a Barber/Beauty Salon could be in guiding those in a positive way towards mental wellness. His ancestors, Grandmother, and all of those who came before him: "We didn't allow Trauma to hold us back, instead fought against it, and pushed for the necessary healing and liberation we deserved." To his Daughter Sareya and Wife Jordon, who is better because of them and supports him as a leader that the world really needs in this critical moment.

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