

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

NAVIGATING A RELATIONAL BIND:  
BLACK AND LATINO EMERGENT ADULT  
MEN'S NEGOTIATION OF THEIR  
RELATIONAL NEEDS IN A MASCULINE  
CONTEXT

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Emergent adulthood is a period of discovery and transition for humans aged 18 to 29 that often requires many practical as well as relational resources. Black and Latino emergent adult men from low socioeconomic backgrounds often navigated through this time period through alternate pathways because of a lack of resources. They may have also experienced substantial stress in childhood that prompted the reliance on hegemonic masculinity as a guide for how to cope with these stressors. This study sought to examine how Black and Latino emergent adult men negotiated their relational needs and abilities within the context of their masculine identities. Using semi-structured life history interviews, Black and Latino young men were interviewed from two youth development centers in the Washington DC/Baltimore area. Findings suggested that the impact of the provider role as adultified children, as well as exposure to violence, increased the participant's likelihood of hegemonic masculine disconnection from family and friends in emergent adulthood. However, this disconnection was often complicated given their

human desire for closeness and support as well as obligations to family members. This complexity was conceptualized as a type of relational bind. Participants used a variety of strategies to resolve this bind that often left them more isolated.

*Keywords:* Emergent adulthood, Black men, Latino men, relationships, hegemonic masculinity

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By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science  
2024

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### **Introduction: Relationships, Masculinity, Emergent Adulthood**

A popular stereotype about men is that they do not talk about their emotions and do not want to talk about them (Siegel & Meunier, 2018). However, current trends in mental health indicate an increasing need for spaces where men, particularly men of color, can feel safe to share their internal worlds. Black men are more likely to commit suicide before the age of 35 than their white peers (Joe et al., 2009). Additionally, Black men have been reported to have higher rates of suicide attempts than their white peers (Onumah et al., 2021). Onumah et al. also discovered that Latino youth were more likely to make a plan for suicide than their white and Black peers (2021). The impact of stressors like discrimination, racism, and immigration have been linked to discussions on suicide for Black and Latino youth and further impact the importance of mental health support (Fortuna et al., 2016; Le & Iwamoto, 2022). This research suggested an urgent need for safe and supportive mental environments for Black and Latino men despite stereotypes of emotional silence.

Within mental health spaces such as therapy, dominant ideas about masculinity can act as barriers to the therapeutic process (Kramer et al., 2021). These concepts hinder the clinician and the client as they begin to work together (Mahalik et al., 2003). For the client, these masculinity scripts can limit help-seeking behaviors and the emotional attunement necessary for therapeutic exploration (Mays et al., 2018). Scripts such as the "tough guy" script create a sense of invulnerability, causing men to struggle to recognize experiences that are causing them pain or harm (Mahalik et al., 2003). Clinicians may possess preconceived ideas of how men will appear in emotional spaces that prevent the therapist from being more open to working with male clients (Mahalik et al., 2003; Seidler et al., 2019). Mahalik (2020) explained that in working with male clients, male clients' rigid adherence to a particular masculine idea created friction and

maladaptation. The messages surrounding masculinity, such as "man up," "men do not cry," and "toughen up," have not prepared young men to explore their emotions or engage with their pain (Bedi & Richards, 2011). These are essential activities in the therapy process and, more importantly, are crucial for relationships.

At the core of therapy is the relationship between the therapist and the client. This idea is part of the concept described as common factors (Gehart, 2016). When researchers looked at the effects of various therapeutic models, they consistently concluded that across all models, there was a set of common factors that accounted for the variance in treatment outcomes (Gehart, 2016). Lambert's (1992) model stated that the therapeutic relationship accounted for thirty percent of the variance. Wampold's (2001) common factors model suggested that the therapeutic relationship, alliance, trust, and hope accounted for eighty percent of the variance.

This concept of common factors, and more specifically, the impact of the therapeutic relationship, indicated that relationships are deeply intertwined within the idea of healing and health. Real (1998, pg 148) explained that social support is the "single best remedy for emotional injury." However, for men, the process of traditional masculine gender socialization prioritizes the importance of self-reliance and emotional numbness over the ability to ask for help. Thus limiting men's ability to meaningfully engage in healing relationships even when amid pain and trauma. Real (1998) identified this traditionally masculine inability among men to engage in relationships – even the perceived need to disconnect from relationships – as *the loss of the relational*.

According to Courtney (2011), while many people perceive masculinity as a set of personality traits defining true manhood, such as aggression, toughness, leadership, decisiveness, ambition, strength, and even detachment from relationships, masculinity is more accurately

understood as a series of behaviors that men repeatedly engage in to prove their worthiness of their gender identity. In this way, even health behaviors are how men display masculinity (Courtney, 2011).

In keeping with Courtney's (2011) outline of masculine health behaviors, when men begin to experience pain in their chest, it is a conventionally masculine act to ignore the tightness in their chest and continue to push through the discomfort. In effect, men push aside any sign of weakness as an act of masculine strength (Courtney, 2011). This behavior may also put men at risk for a variety of health complications long term. However, part of the challenge to manhood is that it is an inconsistent designation. To earn the status of a man, individuals must repeatedly prove their strength to assert their manhood (Vandello et al., 2019). However, this title of man can still be taken away from men after just one failed demonstration of willpower. The unreliable nature of manhood is defined as precarious manhood (Vandello et al., 2019).

Vandello et al.(2019) examined the precarious nature of manhood by noting that men must prove their manhood through multiple masculine acts throughout their lifetime, primarily through the rejection of weakness. This would include dismissing help from others or avoiding help-seeking behavior entirely. The repeated rejection of weakness becomes varied as young men move through each new developmental context.

Salgado et al. (2019) suggested that as men navigated the precarious nature of their manhood, they began to understand that even if there was a major health emergency, it was not worth losing their status of manhood by conceding that they were experiencing a weakness. To fall outside of the brotherhood of man is to lose the power, community, and gender confidence that comes with manhood.

The loss of power and gender confidence for the sake of their health is the negotiation that many men may face. Hegemonic masculinity would imply that seeking help for mental illness goes against the traditional idea of being a man. As a result, men who adhere to these norms may refrain from seeking help, even if it could improve their health. Hegemonic masculine norms disregard the beneficial impact of relationships, deeming it a sign of weakness (Real, 1998). Relationships are crucial not only for physical health but also for mental and emotional well-being. As more Black and Latino emergent adult men seek out spaces to discuss and share their feelings, the way they balance the pressures of their masculine identities with their relational needs will have a significant impact on their health and overall well-being.

## **Literature Review**

### **Emergent Adulthood**

Emerging adulthood is a stage of life when relationships become especially important. Emergent adulthood occurs when humans between age 18 to 29 years old delay significant adult commitments as they grow their sense of self (Arnett, 2004). Young adults may spend this period exploring new life experiences, roles, and belief systems (Gralinski-Bakker et al., 2005). Milestones within emergent adulthood include the development of independence, preparing for future employment, and establishing a sense of community (Courtney, 2011).

The transitions of this developmental period can span all facets of an emergent adult's life. New questions about romantic relationships arise as the opportunities to explore sexuality through sexual partnership become more available than when they were living at home (Arnett, 2004). Shifts in relationships with parents may happen as emergent adults negotiate new levels of connection and freedom. Changing values and adjustments in religious orientation can create unexpected friction with families of origin and childhood communities (Arnett, 2004). Many

emergent adults may begin questioning their gender norms and, thus, what it means to become a man or a woman (Mcdermott & Schwartz, 2013). Finally, society expects them to quickly generate and connect with professional passions (Arnett, 2004).

As emergent adults navigate this transitional period's many shifts and considerations, there is a foundational need for social and practical support. While establishing themselves as individuals is a high priority, it takes many relationships to help emergent adults transition into full adulthood (Arnett, 2004). In many ways, emerging adulthood can be a deeply relational experience, during which young adults discover what it means to be an adult while receiving support from others. Emerging adulthood can be a critical period for young men as they transition into adulthood and consider what it means to be a man. Given all the milestones of this period, the transition can be incredibly challenging for young Black and Latino men from low socioeconomic backgrounds due to the lack of practical resources available to other young adults (Roy & Smith-Lee, 2020).

A lack of social or financial resources means these emergent adults may need to navigate this period through unexpected paths. Roy and Smith-Lee (2020) examined one such unexpected pathway. They identified that young Black men who came from low socioeconomic backgrounds adapted to a lack of resources through a process called ghosting. Ghosting is when an emergent adult would move from one residential location to the other, shifting between homes like a ghost. Ghosting provided individuals with a temporary sense of stability as they worked to rebuild their lives, regain independence, and restore a feeling of safety (Roy & Smith-Lee, 2020). While it is an adaptive strategy for coping with limited resources, this unexpected approach often led to financial and housing insecurity.

Dery (2019) further explored the effects of financial instability on emergent adult men. Through life history interviews, Dery (2019) investigated how a lack of financial resources affected emergent adult men in Africa. The men in Dery's (2019) study explained that lacking financial resources made it significantly more challenging to meet various material needs, including housing and transportation. The participants also shared a sense of shame and powerlessness that arose as they could not achieve certain hegemonic masculine norms (Dery, 2019). The participants could not meet the pressures of achieving financial success due to their backgrounds, which made them feel ashamed for not living up to society's expectations of manhood and adulthood.

Societal expectations of a group of people can be crucial in developing emergent adult men. Gibson (2014) sought to understand the effects of developmental expectations on disabled emergent adult men. For these emergent adults, the expectations of achievement and financial gain created a limiting influence (Gibson et al., 2014). Their ability to generate new and more adaptive conceptualizations of their masculine identity was decreased by the shame they felt. Barriers to their ability status reduced their capacity to meet societal expectations, creating a feeling of powerlessness (Gibson et al., 2014). For these participants, it was the perception of what it meant to be a man that held them back from further development.

These findings suggested that systemic inequalities for emergent adult men of color or other minoritized groups, especially as it related to financial backgrounds, generated distinct experiences within the transition to adulthood. Research on emergent adulthood is usually centered on white, educated, middle—to upper-class college students (Roy & Smith-Lee, 2014). The experiences of Black and Latino men from low socioeconomic backgrounds who couldn't afford college may not be well represented in studies on emerging adulthood (Roy & Smith-Lee,

2014). To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the unique pathways into adulthood for Black and Latino men, the structural and systemic challenges they face must be considered.

### **Structural Barriers**

There are numerous structural and systemic challenges that Black and Latino men encounter in their day-to-day lives that can act as obstacles on the pathway to adulthood. Young Black men are more likely than white men to live and work in areas where there is less financial support, less opportunity for social mobility, and less access to adequate health resources (Johnson, 2019; Gilbert et al., 2019). Men of color who live within the American legal system may deal with overcrowded housing, lower income, and racially biased criminal justice systems (Munger & Seron, 2022). Black and Latino men are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system (Kutateladze et al., 2014). Legislative acts like New York City's "Stop and Frisk", the "War on Drugs", the Harrison Act, and Rockefeller Drug Laws empowered law enforcement groups to make increased searches, detention, and imprisonment of Black and Latino men (Wilson et al., 2014). Furthermore, research indicated that Black and Latino youth were more likely to be formally processed and rearrested than their white peers (Padgaonkar et al., 2020). These experiences are only part of what makes up the systemic challenges that Black and Latino emergent adult men from low socioeconomic backgrounds must face in their transition to adulthood.

Systemic racism and the connected structural barriers include the societal and individual forms of oppression that exclude communities of color from social advancement, social mobility, adequate resources, housing, educational opportunity, and safety in all its forms (De Lissoyoy, 2013; Bailey et al., 2017). To be understood, these systemic barriers must be contextualized in the history of slavery and racism (Bush, 1999; Lee, 2021).

### ***Slavery and Colonization***

To rationalize slavery and colonization, white Europeans established hierarchies of human worth determined by skin color. This framework enabled them to justify the trade, ownership, and mistreatment of individuals of color, ultimately leading to the dehumanization of entire ethnic groups (Bush, 1999). This force of racism continued as white Europeans expanded their influence into the Americas and then into the creation of the United States of America (Bush, 1999).

As Black men and their families were bought and sold as forms of labor, personhood and by extension for Black men, manhood was considered something that was bestowed upon a Black man by a white man (Bush, 1999). In this way, the idea of being a man was something that could only be given to a man of color by another white man. White men set up a system in which they were the arbiters of who could be considered a man and who could not (Bush, 1999). This system, in which white men determined the manhood of other men, further shaped the American legal and social system. White men created initial social structures meant to exclude all communities of color from having access to the same resources that white communities had unless bestowed upon them by a white person (Haeny et al., 2021). These foundational principles established patterns that continued to exclude communities of color from accessing resources and privileges that would allow them increased social mobility, more housing stability, and more excellent educational opportunities. The structural ideas around race contributed to the formation of other race-based policies and actions, including immigration policies like mass detention and deportation (Aranda & Vaquera, 2015).

### ***Immigration***

For many Latino communities, the process of immigration can be a substantial source of stress. The immigration process is often fraught with financial strain, trauma, physical stress, and discrimination for Latino communities (Daniel-Ulloa et al., 2019). When Latino families immigrate to the United States, they often face challenges such as limited financial resources, restricted opportunities for social advancement, and inadequate housing options (Daniel-Ulloa et al., 2019; Mann-Jackson et al., 2018). As Latino men look for work, they may face challenges of job availability, thus limiting their ability to provide for their families (Lopez et al., 2012). Families who may have had to immigrate illegally and still often those who immigrate legally face fears of deportation and separation (Mann-Jackson et al., 2018). This further restricts their ability to seek out or apply for support due to concerns about their immigration status being discovered and reported (Daniel-Ulloa et al., 2019).

The challenges that Black and Latino men face as they transition to adulthood, whether that be immigration, employment disparities, or housing instability, are rooted in the history of slavery and racism (Lee, 2021). These social systems created powerful narratives that structured American policy and the day-to-day life of communities of color, and they persist today (DeLorme & Singer, 2010). Social policies based on a racist legal system generate decreased social mobility, financial opportunity, housing stability, and lowered educational opportunities for communities of color (Bailey et al., 2017; Hardeman et al., 2021). Ultimately, all of these challenges place the Black and Latino men who experience them at a systemic disadvantage that can be a source of significant distress. There are Black and Latino emergent adult men who do not live in the circumstances described. They may have access to higher education or other professional pathways that may allow them a more traditional path through emergent adulthood. However, for Black and Latino men who do not have the financial resources or educational

background needed to attend college, these obstacles may prompt a different route to adulthood (Roy & Jones, 2014). Given their low socioeconomic backgrounds, many of these Black and Latino young men may be exposed through their environment and family to the experiences of poverty, incarceration, and adultification. These three experiences can have critical impacts on their experience in adulthood.

### **Poverty, Incarceration, and Adultification**

These experiences seemed particularly formative for Black and Latino emergent adult men who had to navigate alternative pathways to adulthood. The research also suggested that there is an over-representation of Black and Latino men in terms of poverty, incarceration, and adultification (Thompson, 2019; Hooper et al., 2015; Nicholson, 2021). For many of them, poverty, incarceration, and adultification were experiences that they may have been exposed to during their childhood and had critical effects on their development. These pieces of their background can be strongly connected to a sense of survival. In survival mode, Black and Latino men may lean on hegemonic masculinity as a form of protection (Bondoc et al., 2022; Seaton, 2007).

#### ***Poverty***

Poverty can represent various experiences and classifications beyond the financial calculation (Sue et al., 2019). It can be associated with educational inequalities, social exclusion, mental health disparities, environmental injustice, judicial system disparities, and health care disparities (Sue et al., 2019). In many ways, a lack of resources is at the core of the experience of poverty. For families experiencing poverty, the focus becomes survival, often delaying long-term planning (Weissman et al., 2018).

Poverty has been reported as a significant risk factor for exposure to several traumatic experiences in childhood (Busso et al., 2017). Black and Latino boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds may have an increased likelihood of being exposed to a variety of adverse childhood experiences including, abuse, violence, and housing instability (Watkins & Goodwill, 2019). These exposures to violence and trauma can place boys into survival mode where hegemonic masculinity norms such as stoicism and emotional repression can serve as protective factors (Curtis et al., 2021). By adopting hegemonic masculinity norms, these boys push away any needs that might not be able to be met by their family system or parental unit, given the lack of resources in their environment. In this way, Black and Latino boys may see their emotional suppression as a form of service to their families.

The experience of poverty itself, regardless of what it exposes young boys to, also substantially affects their development. The stress that comes with impoverished living conditions impairs young boys' ability to self-regulate, leading to decreased emotional development (Barbarin et al., 2019). Young boys may also experience decreased educational aspirations after experiencing economic instability (Watson et al., 2023).

For the families of these young boys, there may be so much financial strain that young boys are asked to take on more adult roles to help with family finances. This process of adultification has been observed frequently in families experiencing poverty (Haselschwerdt, 2024). Young boys experiencing poverty may take up informal forms of work, such as hustling, to support their families financially (Scott et al., 2020). Regrettably, when young boys are expected to take on adult responsibilities to support their families financially or in other ways, it can prevent them from participating in crucial developmental activities such as play, learning,

and social interaction (Haselschwerdt, 2024). Poverty overall can lead to increased stress within families and can affect the development of young boys as they transition into adulthood.

### ***Incarceration***

Another common experience for Black and Latino men from low socioeconomic backgrounds is incarceration. Poverty usually demonstrated a bidirectional relationship with incarceration, where poverty heightened the likelihood of engaging in criminal activity and being incarcerated increased economic instability (DeFina & Hannon, 2009). There is a disproportionate representation of Black and Latino men in incarcerated populations (Thompson, 2019). They are often placed there due to a biased legal system that engages in racial profiling, discriminatory sentencing practices, and drug laws that target low-income communities of color (Chappell & Maggard, 2007). Black and Latino men who were incarcerated were stripped of their rights and placed in communities of aggression and isolation.

Cultures within the incarceration system can be considered a unique subculture of masculine expression, with expectations of more aggressive forms of masculinity (Umamheswar & Tadros, 2022). The nature of the incarceration system may have placed Black and Latino men in settings that exposed them to further danger. The isolation of the incarceration system may force them to independently manage the trauma of being dehumanized. Research indicated that many young men who experienced incarceration reported facing mental health challenges that went unaddressed in the prison system (Ng et al., 2011). Thus, aggression, emotional stoicism, and strength became a shield against the stress of incarceration (Bondoc et al., 2022).

Upon re-entry, Black and Latino young adults who experienced incarceration reported decreased school completion and increased adult incarceration (Aizer & Doyle, 2015). Again, qualities connected with hegemonic masculinity became further endorsed through increased

stress and incarceration experiences (Bondoc et al., 2022). Bondoc et al. (2022) conducted a review on the impact of hegemonic masculine norms on Black and Latino adolescents during re-entry after incarceration. While these norms may have increased motivation to find employment and engage in physical exercise, they also decreased the willingness to seek help (Bondoc et al., 2022). Seeking support is particularly important for young Black and Latino men due to the challenges they face after incarceration, such as housing, employment, and educational difficulties (Bondoc et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, the disproportionate amount of Black and Latino men represented in the prison system often increases the likelihood of young Black and Latino boys having their first exposure to incarceration through their parents (Forster et al., 2019). Having a parent who was incarcerated at one point, or another had significant effects on the child's health into emergent adulthood. Research indicated that children who had a parent who was incarcerated were at a higher risk for anti-social behavior as children (Murray et al., 2012). Black and Latino emergent adults who were exposed to incarceration as children were more likely to experience job loss, less likely to pursue postsecondary education, and had a higher likelihood of systemic disadvantage over the life course (Forster et al., 2019). Job loss and lack of education may place Black and Latino emergent adults at a significant disadvantage to develop the financial and career resources needed to transition into adulthood. This systemic disadvantage may place them in a state of survival mode, where hegemonic masculinity acts as a shield against overwhelming emotions, anxiety, and fear (Seaton, 2007). Spending more time in survival mode may reinforce adherence to hegemonic masculinity norms.

Along with this experience, families who experienced the incarceration of a parent must navigate the loss of parental support (Forster et al., 2019). The loss of parental support can often

lead to reduced financial resources, less time spent with children, increased anxiety, and pressure (Shaw, 2022). The increase in responsibilities and the decrease in available resources may place the remaining single parent in a position where they need to ask younger family members to take on adult responsibilities (Turney & Lanuza, 2017; Leon & Rosen, 2023). In these circumstances, young men may also desire to step up and provide for their families.

### ***Adultification***

Adultification is the process by which young people are encouraged or forced into roles above their normative developmental period (Hooper et al., 2015). Adultification can happen at various developmental stages. Many young Black and Latino boys who do not have a father in the home for several reasons, including incarceration, became the "man of the house" (Roy et al., 2014). In a study by Roy et al. (2014), new responsibilities linked to the role of the man of the house were outlined. Participants included emotional labor for other household members, such as their parental figure, and prioritizing the family's needs over personal ones as part of their role as "man of the house". Adjusting to these adult responsibilities led to feelings of uncertainty (Roy et al., 2014). In response to that uncertainty, hegemonic masculinity may have served as a practical blueprint for fulfilling these adult roles.

The literature has conflicting themes around the long-term effects of adultification on emergent adults. Most of the discussion supported the idea that the stress of adultification is unhelpful for the child and can lead to more long-term experiences of anxiety or depression in young adulthood (Garber, 2011). However, Hooper et al. (2015) suggested a more culturally specific lens. They found that boys are more likely than girls to experience adultification and that Latino emergent adults reported a psychological benefit from adultification in childhood (Hooper

et al., 2015). Adultification may prepare young children to be more comfortable in adulthood as they take on other adult responsibilities (Hooper et al., 2015).

While adultification may provide a psychological benefit, boys may feel the need to adopt hegemonic masculine norms in order to survive the process. Norms like emotional restriction that assist young boys as they fulfill adult roles might create unintentional stress. Emotional restriction consistently correlates with poorer health outcomes, less help-seeking behavior, and lower resilience (Galligan et al., 2010). Along with these outcomes, as adultified boys became emergent adults, they reported feeling unsettled in their identities and thus more likely to isolate themselves from friends and family (Roy et al., 2014).

An over-representation of Black and Latino men in the experiences of poverty, incarceration, and adultification suggested that many young Black and Latino men move through these obstacles (Thompson, 2019; Hooper et al., 2015; Nicholson, 2021). These experiences could have significant impacts on their development in adulthood, including impaired emotional regulation, untreated mental health concerns, and lowered resilience (Barbarin et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2011; Galligan et al., 2010). Developmental challenges like these place young Black and Latino men at a disadvantage as they begin their transition into adulthood.

Given the highly stressful experiences that may mark their childhoods, these young men may be placed in a near-constant survival mode. Relying on hegemonic masculinity norms, they may find coping strategies that allow them to move through these high-stress environments. Unfortunately, a reliance on this hegemonic masculinity prompts young men to avoid help-seeking behaviors and relationships that may be crucial to their healing.

### **Masculinities for Black and Latino Men**

As Black and Latino men turn to hegemonic masculinity as a source of support, they also have to learn to navigate the pressures of white hegemonic masculinity, along with their culture of origin's conceptualization of masculinity (Robertson & Kilvington-Dowd, 2019). Hegemonic masculinity is connected to the schemas that guide American society. Therefore, the ideas of hegemonic masculinity are racist, colonized, and patriarchal (Bush, 1999; Cowan, 2017). As Black and Latino men create their cultural expectations of manhood, they may also find ways to conform or resist expectations of white masculinity that are forced upon them (Cowan, 2017; Falicov, 2010).

Courtney (2011) explained that Black and Latino men are more likely than their white counterparts to endorse hegemonic masculinity. This disproportionate endorsement by men of color may come in large part because endorsing hegemonic masculinity norms is an act of survival for Black and Latino men. The effects of everyday discrimination may present a distressing sense of danger. Everyday discrimination includes experiences of being treated with less respect, assumed lower intelligence, assumed danger, threatened or harassed, and poorer treatment from healthcare providers (Ferraro & Zaborenko, 2023). Endorsing these norms may allow minority groups to acculturate to the dominant white norms so that white communities are less likely to deal harm to their community.

### ***Black Men***

A substantial feature of Black masculinity is the desire to connect with their families and be strong providers (Aronson et al., 2003; Griffith et al., 2019). Expectations of becoming protectors and providers may motivate Black men. However, as Aronson et al.'s (2003) work highlights, young Black men often confront expectations from their communities that they will fail and be bad influences on others. This expectation of failure is compounded through the

experiences of everyday discrimination that assumes Black men are the problem (Ferraro & Zaborenko, 2023)

These conflicting hopes of being a provider and the expectations of failure can put increased pressure on Black men. Black men are often required to prove their manhood more frequently than their White peers. Hardy (2013) described this constant underestimation and high expectation as an assault on the consciousness. As Black men navigate both white and Black spaces, Black men may use hegemonic masculinity norms to survive the assault on the consciousness (Payne, 2006). Unable to live up to certain masculine ideals set out by white society, Black men may begin to compensate through the adoption of hypermasculine attitudes such as aggression, violence towards women, substance abuse, and hypersexualization (Cunningham & White, 2019). By being forced to balance expectations of white and Black assumptions about manhood, Black men may feel an increased sense of uncertainty and anxiety.

### ***Latino Men***

Latino men may often share many of the same experiences as Black men while still having their unique cultural lens. For Latino men, traditional masculinity may connect with the concept of machismo (Mayo, 1997). Machismo is frequently associated with masculinities like toxic and hegemonic (Mayo, 1997). Cowan (2017) explained that the concept of machismo became associated with hypermasculinity as a way of highlighting issues within Latino culture. This led to the perception that Latino men would not seek help. This assumption may have given healthcare providers reasons not to support Latino men's health, further worsening healthcare disparities (Heckert, 2017).

Falicov (2010) explored how Latino men deconstructed the concept of machismo. Through a strengths-based approach, Latino men reclaimed positive aspects of machismo, such as respect

and dignity (Falicov, 2010). The concept of familismo may affect how Latino men deconstruct machismo. Familismo is the tendency within Latino families to hold the needs of the family above that of individual needs (Marin & Marin, 1991). This tendency may be an essential factor in Latino male relationships, thus encouraging Latino men to stay connected with relationships despite hegemonic norms. This tendency may also place a family expectation for Latino males to be strong providers who place their needs after the family's. This may lead Latino males to deny their personal needs and decrease their ability to be open and vulnerable with family.

Latino men may also face expectations of acculturating around white masculinity. Valeriano (2014) explored how the participants' chosen soccer team measured Latino men's acculturation. Latino men were considered more acculturated if they endorsed a U.S. soccer team rather than their home country's soccer team. Valeriano (2014) submitted that this measure of acculturation, the abandonment of a home country, played out through the choice of a soccer team, was outdated and colonizing. However, for Latino men, this may be how they feel they are assessed by white men around their acculturation in masculine spaces. Concerns about how they are assessed around their acculturation may further contribute to the feeling of survival mode.

As Black and Latino men negotiate both white and culturally specific expectations of what it means to be a man, it may leave them feeling extremely vulnerable. As feelings of hypervulnerability rise, hypermasculine presentations may also increase (Seaton, 2007). Hypervulnerability can feel like a near-constant state of survival mode. Thus, masculine qualities like aggression, strength, and invulnerability may help Black and Latino men feel safe. However, the cost of hegemonic masculinity may be the loss of relational capacity needed to seek out support.

### **The Loss of the Relational**

During emergent adulthood, there are several developmental milestones, including financial development, career development, and relationship development (Arnett, 2004). To achieve these milestones, help from others, as well as the ability to seek support from trusted relationships, may be required. Thus, emergent adulthood is a profound relationship experience. For many young adults, this relational experience is accomplished in the context of college (Arnett, 2004; Roy & Jones, 2014). However, college may not be an option for young men from low socioeconomic circumstances; thus, alternate pathways to adulthood must be constructed (Roy & Jones, 2014).

Along with these alternate pathways, many of these young men face substantial challenges because of structural barriers that placed them in a state of survival mode, which increased their reliance on hegemonic masculinity to protect them from stress (Seaton, 2007). However, hegemonic masculinity may decrease help-seeking behavior (Galligan et al., 2010). This may prevent Black and Latino men from leaning on trusted relationships during emergent adulthood. Therefore, masculinity and young men's understanding of what it means to be a man may be crucial to how young men navigate relationships in emergent adulthood.

### ***Hegemonic Masculinity***

In an activity done with several thousand young men of various ages, Kimmel (2018) asked young men to share what made a good man. Participants inevitably listed qualities like "integrity, honor, being responsible, being a good provider, doing the right thing, putting others first, caring, standing up for the little guy" (Kimmel, 2018, p. 173). When asked to explain what it means to be a real man, the list became "Never cry, be strong, do not show your feelings, play through pain, suck it up, power, aggression, win at all costs, be aggressive, be responsible, get rich, get laid" (Kimmel, 2018, p. 174). The second list encompasses the idea of hegemonic

masculinity and, unfortunately, is used to judge a man's manhood. In the journey to becoming a “real” man, other meaningful qualities of humanity are hidden. These include emotional vulnerability, relational capacity, empathy, gentleness, and willingness to seek help. These qualities may be essential during emergent adulthood as young adults need to lean on relationships for support.

Despite the impact of hegemonic masculinity on young men, when a baby boy is first born, like all other babies, it is built for connection. As Chu (2018, p. 91) states, "People are not only born into relationships, they are born ready for relationships. Moreover, it is human nature to seek connections and resist disconnections." Young boys demonstrate relational capacity in a variety of ways. They can be straightforward in their expression, authentic in their meaning, self-aware, and emotionally perceptive (Chu, 2018). Relational capacity is most often associated with femininity. Hegemonic masculinity stands in opposition to the feminine, and many feminine qualities are considered weaknesses when displayed by a man. Therefore, over time, the feminine quality of relational capacity is at odds with a more masculine identity (Way, 2011).

### ***Disconnection from Family***

bell hooks (2004) explained that given what it takes to survive in the world as a man, parents and other trusted adults of young boys prepare their children to make a relational shift through the toys that they play with, the friendships they are allowed to make, the tears that are held back, and the emotions they are allowed to express. As part of becoming a man, boys are asked to distance themselves from their mothers, friends, and eventually themselves. Real (1998) conceptualized this as the loss of the relational.

In traditional masculinity, men stand in resistance to the feminine, and a boy's relationship with his mother is considered an effeminizing influence (Real, 1998). Hegemonic

masculinity supposes that by spending too much time around mothers, young boys will grow up to be homosexual and “soft” (Real, 1998). Therefore, as part of the first loss of the relational boys cut themselves off from their mothers and spend more time with their fathers. Kimmel (2018) theorized that fathers and mothers often encouraged this shift, a painful form of distancing that mothers must ask the young boy to make to begin becoming a man. Real (1998) points out that through years of research it is clear that, spending more time with mothers and less time with fathers does not lead to homosexuality in boys or to the development of "soft" boys. Nevertheless, hegemonic masculinity assumes that the separation from mothers is crucial for male development.

### *Disconnection from Self*

Outside of the relationship with the mother, young boys’ masculine identity may be created through repeated acts of distancing themselves from anything that might be considered weak (Curtis et al., 2021). This would include emotional vulnerability through emotional expression. Thus, young boys began covering up their emotional expression to hide their relational capacity (Curtis et al., 2021). It is important to note that boys do not stop engaging in relationships entirely. Humans are built to be in relationships, but what changed was the way they engaged in relationships (Chu, 2018). For example, as boys began to distance themselves from their emotional centers, this presented as indifference or inaccessibility in their relationships with family and peers.

Oransky and Marecek (2009) found that young boys felt pressure to distance themselves from more emotional expressions like sadness or exuberance. They hid these emotional expressions by adopting a more stoic presentation, and distance from weakness was established. This form of masculine posturing served the purpose of proving masculine identity. However, it

made it more difficult for boys to honestly engage with others and for others to engage with them (Chu, 2018).

In male peer friendships, Nielson et al. (2023) showed that young boys who endorse more traditional masculine norms perceived that their social relationships were more precarious than young boys who did not endorse traditional masculine norms. This sense of precariousness may have come from a new need to prove themselves amongst their male peer friendships and an uncertainty of how to connect as they adopted more stoic presentations (Nielson et al., 2023). In order to prove their masculine identity, men must betray the self. In their second loss of the relational, boys betrayed their own relational needs and authentic emotional expression for a more guarded presentation (Real, 1998).

### ***Disconnection from Peers***

As young males move into adolescence, the enactment of masculinity is most often played out through their bodies and social interactions with peers. Mora (2012) reviewed the impact of masculinity in adolescent boys. For adolescent boys who began the process of puberty, their masculinity was enacted through feats of strength in school and measured by the changes in their bodies (Mora, 2012). An increased presence of pubic hair, height, and muscle definition signaled to their peers that they are becoming real men (Mora, 2012). These experiences highlighted the third aspect of the loss of the relational; as young boys learned competition over cooperation, creating distance between themselves and their friends (Real, 1998).

Relational capacity describes an individual's ability to connect with others and seek support when needed (Chu, 2018; Real, 1998). As young men move into emergent adulthood, the ability to ask for help or relational capacity may become paramount. Thus, the loss of the relational that comes through the adoption of hegemonic masculinity may place emergent adults

who endorse hegemonic masculinity at a greater risk during this time. This is compounded when one considers the lived experiences of Black and Latino emergent adult males. Black and Latino young men may have had experiences in childhood that further encouraged them to endorse hegemonic masculinity (Seaton, 2007). However, there are examples of Black and Latino men from low-resourced backgrounds who engaged with their relational capacities.

### *Evidence of Relational Capacity*

Research indicated that hegemonic masculinity promises security and survival (Seaton, 2007; Bondoc et al., 2022). Unfortunately, it is at the cost of the disconnection from relationships and self (Chu, 2018). Despite its promise of protection, this might be exactly what young men of color do not need. Instead, connection in supportive relationships might better protect them from threats to their physical and mental health.

Young Black boys dealing with traumatic exposure reported that seeking out friends was a meaningful and powerful method of coping and healing (Bauer et al., 2020). Bauer et al. (2020) studied young Black boys processing trauma, noted that while most young Black boys did not seek out mental health services because of masculine stigma, participants found comfort and support in friends and music. Washington and Johnson (2012) explored community organizations that worked with young Black men. They discovered from interviews with frontline workers that one of the most critical factors for young Black male development was the need for positive and supportive mentoring relationships. Participants expressed that young Black boys experienced meaningful change and growth when these relationships were present.

Roy and Dyson (2010) further explored how Black men worked to negotiate the relationship of fatherhood with the lack of resources brought about by systemic inequalities. These Black fathers demonstrated an ability to adaptively respond to the lack of resources while still having

meaningful connections and relationships with their children by creating alternative masculinities (Roy & Dyson, 2010). Expectations of hegemonic masculinity suggested that these fathers would have cut themselves off from their emotional connections. However, Roy and Dyson's (2010) work suggested that these relational abilities were intact and within reach.

This concept is further demonstrated through the work of Umamaheswar and Tadros (2022). Through interviews with incarcerated Black and Latino men, they explored how these men were breaking from hegemonic masculinity norms to create new masculine identities that better served their relationships with their families (Umamaheswar & Tadros, 2022). The men in the studies above shed light on the undiscovered relational lives of Black and Latino men. These men demonstrated that despite hegemonic masculinity norms, Black and Latino men found ways to be in connective relationships.

### **Research Question**

Emergent adulthood is a period of time between the ages of 18 to 29 when young people delay adult responsibilities as their sense of self is further developed (Arnett, 2004). This developmental period is marked by several essential explorations, including belief systems, careers, relationships, sex, and personal values (Arnett, 2004). This period of life requires the support of a network of relationships to transition to adulthood successfully. In this way, emergent adulthood could be considered a profoundly relational experience. For many young adults who have the financial ability to attend a university or college, the collegiate environment becomes where they find this support network (Roy & Jones, 2014). Emergent adults who do not have these financial resources may have to develop alternate pathways to adulthood. This may be especially true for Black and Latino young men from low socioeconomic backgrounds, given some of the structural inequities that they face.

Black and Latino men are disproportionately represented in experiences of housing instability, job insecurity, discrimination, lowered social mobility, and challenges related to the justice system (Johnson, 2019; Gilbert et al., 2019). These systemic barriers were rooted in historical racism and discrimination, which set up patterns in America to gatekeep necessary resources from communities of color (Bush, 1999).

Black and Latino young men who grew up in low socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to have experienced poverty, incarceration, and adultification because of these systemic barriers (Thompson, 2019; Hooper et al., 2015; Nicholson, 2021). These three experiences had significant effects on the development of these young men, including struggles with emotional regulation, overlooked mental health challenges, and lowered resilience (Barbarin et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2011; Galligan et al., 2010). Being exposed to all of these challenges placed young men in a state of hypervulnerability or survival mode, where hegemonic masculinity served as a coping strategy (Seaton, 2007). Hegemonic masculinity became a way that young men traversed the extreme stressors of their childhood.

Given a variety of cultural factors within the Black male community as well as the Latino male community, hegemonic masculinity often became compounded in its effect as well as taking on its unique forms. Black men navigated desires to be providers while battling expectations of failure (Aronson et al., 2003). This constant underestimation led to an assault on the consciousness that may lead to more aggressive forms of masculinity (Hardy, 2013). For Latino men, expectations about machismo were placed upon them by medical communities as a way to avoid helping them (Cowan, 2017). However, how they engaged with familismo may have led Latino men to alternate forms of machismo (Marin & Marin, 1991). Ultimately, Black

and Latino men may be more likely to assimilate to ideas around hegemonic masculinity as a way to protect themselves from white men (Courtney (2011).

While hegemonic masculinity may serve as a way to protect young men from harm, it also can lead to the loss of the relational – or the way young men disconnect from family, friends, and themselves in order to be considered a man (Real, 1998). Regardless of stereotypes about men, boys are born with relational capacity. They demonstrate this through their exuberance and honesty (Chu, 2018). As boys get older, they go through a process of cutting themselves off from the relational or feminine influence. Thus, their capacity to seek help decreases, an essential skill for emergent adulthood.

Despite the impact of hegemonic masculinity, research indicated that relational capacity was intact (Roy & Dyson, 2010; Umamheswar & Tadros, 2022). Black and Latino men demonstrated a sincere desire to connect with family even when facing impossible circumstances. Young Black and Latino boys demonstrated coping skills that relied on their friends and music (Bauer et al., 2020). These are the qualities that some young men may hide in their efforts to protect their status as men.

Black and Latino emergent adults are facing a growing mental health crisis. Meaningful relationships with others and their relational capacity may become more critical, especially during emergent adulthood. However, structural inequalities that often place Black and Latino men at a higher risk for stress lead these young men to endorse hegemonic masculinity norms that may decrease their capacity for relationships. Still, research suggested that this relational capacity was still present but perhaps hidden.

Therefore, in this study, I examine *how Black and Latino emergent adult men negotiate their relational needs and abilities within the context of their masculine identities.*

## **Methods**

### **Qualitative Approach**

To answer this question, this study employed a qualitative approach (Daly, 2007), utilizing secondary data analyses with data collected by Dr. Kevin Roy. A qualitative approach provided insight into the particular phenomenon or Black and Latino emergent adult men's context, meaning, and process (Roy et al., 2014). The research question sought to understand how Black and Latino men moved through emergent adulthood and, more specifically, how they engaged with their relational capacity and masculine identities. Black and Latino men who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and are in the emergent adult phase of their lives often take on alternative pathways to adulthood because of the complex challenges of their lives (Roy & Jones, 2014). A qualitative approach allowed for a nuanced and in-depth methodology to understand the intersectional layers of their stories and experiences.

Semi-structured life history interviews were used to understand how Black and Latino emergent adult men negotiated their relational capacities within their masculine context. During life history interviews, participants were asked to share experiences and stories across their lifetime. For these participants, interviews spanned from when they were children to their present day. The semi-structured nature of these interviews meant that the interviewers had a set of questions they were asked to use during their interview but also had the freedom to follow the participants as they shared what came up for them. These interviews provided the appropriate developmental context to understand the masculine experiences contributing to the disconnection from relational capacity.

### **Site and Sample**

Dr. Roy collected qualitative life history interviews over 18 months from two youth development programs in the Baltimore/Washington, DC metropolitan area. The first site, the Urban Progress Program (U.P.), worked to help out-of-school youth change their lives and has worked in the community for over a decade (Roy & Smith-Lee, 2020). U.P. staff provided career guidance, literacy, GED, job readiness and placement, life skills and health education classes, substance abuse counseling, and mental health interventions with counseling. The collection team included students trained in couple and family therapy who provided two weekly life skills sessions in conflict management, coping with violent exposure, and dealing with stress and depression.

The second program, Diversity Matters (D.M.), was also a youth development project. Located in a former high school, it hosted a community garden and was connected to extension education from a nearby university. Cohorts of D.M. participants worked as mentors for high school students and provided career training, supervision, and life skills classes daily. The collection team offered similar interactive sessions in the D.M. program.

The data set comprised 42 total life history interviews across the two youth development programs. Of those 42 life interviews, 21 participants were from U.P., and 21 were from D.M. All of the participants from the U.P. program identified as African American except for one who identified as Latino. From the D.M. program, 11 participants identified as Latino, and 10 identified as African American. At the U.P. program, the participants ranged from 17 to 23, with an average age of 19. At the D.M. program, the participants ranged from 17 to 21, with the average age being 19. A total of nine participants were fathers, who ranged in age from 19 to 21. Two of the nine men were teen fathers, and over half of the participants have experienced being incarcerated.

Out of the 42 interviews within the dataset, 20 were selected between the U.P. Program and the D.M. program. With an overall understanding of the sample, Dr. Roy purposively sampled young men who discussed masculinity most directly and extensively, with the target of 2/3 Black and 1/3 Latino participants. After Dr. Roy selected the 20 participants, the sample consisted of 7 participants from the Diversity Matters (35%) and 13 participants from UP (65%) (See *Figure 1*). In the sample, 12 participants identified as African American (60%), and 8 identified as Latino (40%) (See *Figure 2*). The participants' ages ranged from 17 to 22, with an average age of 19. The majority of participants were 18 years old. There were 2 participants who were 17 (10%), 6 who were 18 (30%), 1 who was 19 (5%), 4 who were 20 (20%), 4 who were 21 (20%), and 2 who were 22 (10%) (See *Figure 3*). See *Table 1* for a full sample demographics and pseudonyms.

A sample size of 20 from a more significant sample of 42 was selected for the following reasons. The goal was to understand complex dynamics within a specific developmental and cultural context. Therefore, depth and nuance become paramount (Roy et al., 2014). Thus, a smaller sample size allowed for a more focused approach to capture the complexity. The sample size still needed to be big enough to allow for variation and comparison, so a sample size of 10 or even 5 was deemed too small for analysis (Roy et al., 2014). A sample size of 20 granted the ability to extract meaningful comparisons to make sense of the complexity of Black and Latino males' lived experiences.

### **Data Collection**

There were two primary methods of data collection. For several weeks, the collection team recorded extensive field notes on formal session interactions and the informal and extended conversations with the staff and participants at each site. This method provided information on

ecological processes and contexts (such as physical mobility, limited job and educational opportunities, and the negotiation of neighborhoods and peer networks), community obstacles, support for youth development, mental health considerations, and close relationships with friends and family members. After developing a consistent and trusting relationship with the participants, the collection team approached each young man in the class to set up a time to interview them. Each class member was approached, but inconsistent class attendance meant some participants were less likely to confirm and meet up for an interview after the initial agreement.

Semi-structured life-history interviews were conducted in classroom settings. The young men met with research team members in a private classroom at each site for a one-to-two-hour interview. The interviews examined several factors or themes of the participant's life but focused on how family members, primary parents, and close kin supported sons in the transition to adulthood. The following topics were also explored:

- daily routines;
- next steps in work and education;
- support networks of friends and family;
- school and job experiences;
- what it means to be an adult and when families first considered them adults;
- family conflict;
- fluid residential or custodial change;
- coming to terms with masculinity and manhood;
- intimate relationships;
- incarceration and/or gang activity;

- and depression or related trauma.

### **Data Quality**

A range of methods were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The credibility and dependability of the data were enhanced through triangulation methods, multiple data sources, and multiple data collection methods. Prolonged engagement in the field also enhanced the credibility of the interview data. Member checks were done through in-person discussions with most young men a few weeks after the interviews to check the collection team's understanding of their initial impressions. Interviews were recorded on audiotapes and transcribed. Interview and field note texts were coded using AtlasTI software. Pseudonyms were used for participants to protect their identity.

### **Data Analysis**

I conducted data analysis for this secondary data set. I performed three coding phases for data analysis using a grounded theory approach: open, axial, and selective. A grounded theory approach (LaRossa, 2005) was selected for this project because a more discovery or exploratory-based approach was necessary to develop a conceptual framework to promote understanding of this relatively underexamined phenomenon of masculinity for Black and Latino young men.

I first used the open coding phase during a grounded theory analysis, which includes coding or "naming" *within* each interview unit (*See Appendix A for the complete list of codes*). The axial phase of coding focused on comparing and contrasting codes *across* cases. I identified conceptually similar categories while noting any overlapping and distinguishing characteristics of codes. Finally, I conceptualized major and minor codes in the selective coding phase to offer a complete and detailed framework.

### **Reflexivity**

A qualitative approach encouraged a more subjectivist point of view from the researcher, taking the epistemological stance that multiple realities and constructions of reality exist in any given system. A qualitative approach also supposed that the researcher is the tool in the analysis process. The researcher's perspective and lived experience shaped the interpretation and extractions from the data. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge the experiences that informed my perspective. First and most salient is that I am a privileged white male who came from a high socioeconomic background. I share the identity of a man and being socialized as a man. Beyond that, I do not share many of the same lived experiences as Black and Latino men in this sample. My connection to this group of men comes through educational opportunities. I have worked on a qualitative project, where I coded stories from the lives of multiracial and multiethnic fathers. I have worked as a teaching assistant for Dr. Roy in his class, explaining the impact of masculinity on men's health. Finally, I have worked as a relational therapist with several young men of color. All of these experiences have provided me with a particular understanding of the impacts of masculinity on the lives of men of color. My work as a relational therapist has especially informed my knowledge of the impact of masculinity on relationships. To ensure intentional use of my worldview view, I engaged in regular reflexivity practice through a journal during the coding process. I will also be involved in regular conversations with Dr. Roy as a form of triangulation to help with the study's rigor.

## **Findings Chapter 1: Exposure to Stress In Childhood**

### **Introduction**

From a very young age, these participants were exposed to high levels of stress. They learned to traverse dangerous neighborhoods, a lack of resources because of low socioeconomic circumstances, complicated relationship dynamics with adult figures, exposure to extreme violence, and, for many, eventually, incarceration. Exposure to this kind of stress over long periods significantly impacted the lives and relationships of these young adults. In response to this stress, many of these young boys had to develop a variety of coping strategies that drew from ideas of hegemonic masculinity, such as emotional repression, increased aggression, and reduced trust in the world and the relationships that they had with others.

These coping strategies may have allowed them to protect themselves through periods of high stress and conflict during childhood. Unfortunately, for many participants, engaging in these coping strategies encouraged significant disconnection behaviors during emergent adulthood. By disconnecting during emergent adulthood, young men resolved the tensions within their relationships with their families and friends. This disconnection seemed to leave them significantly isolated and lonely during their transition into adulthood.

### **Stressful Environments**

Participants often described a broad sense of stress that seemed present for them at most points during their childhood. The neighborhoods that they lived in as children were unsafe. There was frequent gun violence, theft, and murder. Even if these young boys did not go outside, they were aware of the sounds of the chaos going on outside and even had some direct visual exposure. A participant of the Urban Progress (U.P.) Center in Baltimore, Maryland, named Young One, who was attending the center to get his GED for his daughter, described a part of his

neighborhood when he stated, "Yeah, they used to call it "Death Man Lane" for real. Like there's only one way in and one way out, for real." Young One described knowing from a young age that there was a portion of his neighborhood that could get him killed. Being on the lookout for potentially fatal situations while he was walking down the street created a significant sense of hypervigilance. This hypervigilance likely affected Young One's ability to feel safe and trust the world around him.

A participant named Duarte, a 20-year-old Latino male who attended the Diversity Matters Program in Riverdale, MD (D.M.) described an experience in his childhood home that made him feel unsafe or, at the very least, more vigilant. Duarte shared about a time when he was in his home at night and saw violence right outside his window; he stated, "We were in our house, and we saw a group of people hitting him, one person, and there was [a shot], [and] then the ambulance and the police." Duarte's home should have been a place of comfort and safety, but he may not have felt that way growing up in his neighborhood. That sense of vigilance may have never ceased for these young boys, which increased the need for coping strategies.

This need for vigilance existed when participants walked down the street, in their homes, and even at school. DeOntte was a 17-year-old African American who attended the U.P. center. He was a highly talented musician and made his first paycheck when he was a kid playing drums for his church. When DeOntte's grandmother received a concerning report about a school he would attend, she elected to home-school him. DeOntte explained the school that he would have attended as "one of the most predominantly dangerous high schools and that it was under 5 accounts of assault; teachers slept [with] student[s]; arson." Unfortunately, this description of school was not an isolated experience. Most participants outlined a harsh school environment with the presence of frequent fights, gang activity, and bullying. Being unable to feel safe at

school was one of the reasons that these young boys faced significant challenges at school, which had substantial impacts on their education.

Exposure to stress in school, their neighborhoods, and at home lead to a sustained level of hypervigilance for these young boys. One of these young boys was Fry. Fry was a 21-year-old African American who attended the U.P. center. Fry had a challenging relationship with his father, making him feel he had to step up to help his mother at a very young age. As he described the stress he experienced as a child, he shared a business venture he was trying to get off the ground with his friend - a clothing brand named “STRESSED OUT.” When he was asked why this was going to be the name of his clothing brand, he stated,

That’s my neighborhood, that’s a name me and a lot of other guys in my neighborhood, that’s what [we] call ourselves. That’s what we looked like, stressed cause growing up in Baltimore, there’s a lot of stress, and we feel, that’s what we are, we’re stressed out. We go through a lot, so that’s why we are stressed out.

This quote captured the feelings of many of the participants. Feeling calm and safe may have been a luxury that they were rarely able to experience. They were exposed to so much stress and violence throughout their childhood that pinpointing their sense of stress to a few things became complicated. Therefore, the best way to describe their physical, emotional, and mental state in childhood and adulthood was “stressed out.”

### **Low-Socioeconomic Circumstances**

One of the major stressors for these children and their families was a lack of financial resources. Their parents worked multiple low-income jobs at inconvenient hours, had unstable housing circumstances, and a significant lack of standard resources. During his interview, Matt, a 20-year-old Latino male who attended the U.P. center, shared a painful story of grief, death, and

a loss of ambition. When asked to share his insights about why he thought things were so bad in his neighborhood, he stated, "Money, it's all to deal with money. (So, the people they have money?) Either they have it or don't have it, or trying to get it, or they had it and it got [taken]." This quote from Matt is powerful when the impact of violence on his life is considered. Matt explained that much of the violence or stress that is generated comes as an effort to get money. Many of the participants decided to begin hustling or joining gangs because they wanted to make money for themselves and their families. In engaging in these activities, they increased their exposure to violence beyond the stress that they would have faced just staying in their homes.

Family was often a motivating force for the emerging adults in this study. Participants watched their parents work several jobs to keep a roof over their children's heads. Kwame, a 19-year-old African American who attended the U.P. center, expressed a sincere love for his family. He described a meaningful and trusting relationship with his mother that he felt comfortable leaning on. When asked about his relationship with his mother, Kwame said, "She was working 2 to 3 jobs just so we did have name brand stuff. We always had food. She always cooked. She made breakfast for us". He further stated that she was a "strong black woman," and it was apparent from his description that he had immense respect for her. Kwame's story about his mother exemplified the lengths some parents had to go through to ensure their children were cared for. Unfortunately, this was not always enough, and despite his mother's efforts, Kwame also took on financial responsibilities at home to help with the finances.

Some other young men expressed experiencing solitary relationships with their parents during their formative years. DeOntte explained that his mother had to work odd hours on top of her other job; he stated, "My mom was working like 3 am to 12:30. So it was like I was alone." For DeOntte's mother to make ends meet, she had to leave him alone in the house while she

went to work. DeOntte likely experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation because of the lengths that his mother had to go to. This experience was reflected in the story of Mano, an 18-year-old Latino who attended the D.M. program. Mano was a highly ambitious young man who immigrated to the U.S. with his mother; he expressed sincere gratitude for all his mother's sacrifices and wanted to make her proud. Mano shared his mother's work experience: "My mom works at night in D.C. cleaning buildings. She cleans like four floors or something. (So you ate by yourself?) I would eat by myself and watch T.V." Mano loved his mother and may have felt lonely because of her job requirements.

Many of these parents were required to work to provide resources for their children and likely had to make complicated sacrifices in their relationships with their children. Despite their sacrifices, many parents could only offer minimal stability. These young men frequently described their housing circumstances as uncertain. One such young man was Snoop, a 17-year-old African American who attended the U.P. center. Snoop dreamed of making it big in the NBA and being able to take his mom and the rest of his friends out of the neighborhoods where he grew up. He explained one particularly harrowing living situation, he stated,

I had lead paint poison disease [and] I still got it to this day; my mother was trying to find a lawyer so I could handle that, but I like our old landlord. He skipped town, and they had been looking for him since I was six.

Snoop's dream of being able to pull his mother and friends out of these circumstances could be considered honorable and reasonable, given the experience he had with this landlord.

Unfortunately, instances like this, where the housing was unsafe, meant that Snoop and his mother had to move.

Frequent movement from one housing location to the next was something that several participants also experienced. Esteban, a 20-year-old Latino in the D.M. program, vehemently expressed wanting to go into computers so that he never had to worry about money again. This desire for stability may have arisen from his experiences with housing instability. He commented, "We are kind of all over the place, but it's fine. (I do remember you had moved a lot with your family.) Yeah, I moved a lot." Esteban did not clarify the reason for the frequent moves.

However, for some young men like Fry, these moves came because of evictions. Fry shared his experience of a neglectful relationship with his father, who would leave the family during evictions and allow them to finish the packing without his help. Fry stated, "It has been times when we were getting evicted out of the house, and he would pack stuff, go his way, and leave us to do everything by ourselves." In Fry's experience, the housing and parental support sometimes became inconsistent. The inability to afford rent often meant these young men had to navigate new neighborhoods and schools. Unable to find consistency in their environment because of socioeconomic circumstances may have increased their sense of hypervigilance as they had to learn new environments each time they moved.

The inconsistency in housing was often mirrored in other vital resources in the lives of these young boys. For example, Kendall, a 21-year-old African American who attended the D.M. program and longed to be a filmmaker, explained how his parents had complicated medical benefits through their jobs and still do. Kendall remarked,

They don't have medical. But I'll be back on it once I go back to school this semester.

Cuz that's what my parent's medical requires. Well, at least my mom does; I don't think

my dad does; I'm not sure. I didn't think about it. I know my mom does. That's why I try to avoid hospitals and accidents period.

Thankfully, Kendall had financial support from the government to attend a community college nearby. Still, being out of school during this time meant that he had to avoid getting sick, having accidents, or having medical problems more generally. For Kendall, if he were to get sick, this could have become a significant financial strain on him and his family. Thus, vigilance may be required to stay healthy, which would place further stressors on him and his family.

Access to things like healthcare or education may require significant sacrifices from the parents to provide those things for their children. One such case is Mano, who explained why his mother decided to immigrate with her family to the U.S. After his cousins visited him, "When my cousins went back, they were talking about how they had a computer and stuff, and she felt really bad because I wouldn't have that chance. So that's why she decided to make that sacrifice." Mano's mother was willing to move across countries so that her son could access educational and professional opportunities currently unavailable to him where he was growing up. Mano decided that he would like to use this experience of immigrating to the U.S. to become an ambassador and improve the immigration experiences of others.

For other participants, more basic resources like food and clothing were sparse. DeOntte explained that they went without essential food groups for about a year in a particularly financially poor period. DeOntte described, "I remember it was days we just had bread, or we didn't have anything. I remember not eating meat for like a whole year." Fry noted that as a young boy, "we missed [school] because we didn't have our clothes, we didn't have clothes." Fry and DeOntte were so financially strained that they could not afford essential resources like food and clothing. The lack of clothing also meant that Fry could not attend school and get an

education. This lack of resources likely had significant developmental effects on their physical, emotional, and cognitive development.

### **Taking on Adult Roles**

This substantial lack of resources was the primary reason many sought out opportunities for financial gain at young ages and why many participants took on provider roles in their families before they were eighteen. The new, more adult roles they took on as young boys could be described as adultification. Several young men expressed feeling like the "man of the house." (Roy et al.2014). They likely took on several responsibilities in this role, including that of a guide or second parent, translator, and financial provider.

Participants who took on adult roles in their family systems had different expectations in their relationships with their parents and siblings. These changes in their relationships with the family created inevitable tensions and challenges for these young men as they moved into adulthood. Fry expressed what it meant to be the man of the house and what he did for his family when he shared,

I was doing everything. I was out there hustling, striving, getting the money, helping my mother with the bills when I could, putting food in the house, putting clothes on our backs, making sure we were in school. I mean, I was trying to do it all at once but shouldn't have had to. I shouldn't have had to. I was still young. I still had the childhood life that needed to be there but wasn't there. You know. You know what I'm saying, like, it was...rough. It was hard.

The burden of being a provider at a young age weighed on Fry. In some ways, Fry's childhood was overshadowed by his responsibilities and obligations to his family. During childhood, Fry's

role as a provider defined him and became why he went out and developed into the person he became.

These stories and quotes often emerged when participants were asked to describe their roles and responsibilities throughout their childhood. Old Cat was a 22-year-old African American man who attended U.P. Old Cat loved Tupac and considered the artist a mentoring influence given the neglect he experienced. As a child he took on several adult responsibilities in his home,

Being the man of the house and keeping my brothers and sisters in order helps moms out.

(When you say man of the house, how did you do that? At this point, you're 11-13?)

Make sure the house is cleaned up, and make sure they're in bed on time. You know, food gets cooked, help serve the plates and everything. Help out with the homework and everything.

Old Cat took on the role of a second parent, responsible for providing his sibling with food, clothing, and valuable life lessons. As an 11-13-year-old, Old Cat took on roles that most adults would have been unsure of how to fulfill. Still, Old Cat was required to fulfill these roles because his mother could not be there, given their financial strains. This type of adultification changed how Old Cat was expected to engage with his family, forcing him to mature in ways that were not normative for his age.

For some Latino participants, being a translator may have been a type of adultification that they experienced as they helped their parents navigate primarily English-speaking places. Fernando, an 18-year-old Latino from the D.M. program, described his relationship with his father and how he would support his father. Fernando explained,

Well, first, I just like, since he doesn't know English, I just translated, yeah, and then I just started helping him, like carrying some stuff around, some small stuff, and then when I got older then, I helped carry the big stuff since he was getting old I don't want him to hurt himself.

Fernando's adultification came through the process of having to engage in adult conversations through the action of translating. By having to translate for his father, he slowly took on a role in his parental system that gave him more influence and exposure to adult responsibilities. As a translator, this may have changed some of the power balances in his relationship with his parents and increased his obligation to support his family, given that his father did not speak English.

The primary adult role that most of these young men fulfilled or would fulfill as part of their family was financial provider, whether for their family or themselves. Young One expressed this idea when he stated his role in his family: "I was the money man for real. Cause I was always the person with money in the house, you feel me." In many ways, ideas about hegemonic masculinity were present in the way that these young men talked about their role as financial providers. The way that Young One described himself as the money man seems to conflate his role in the family as part of his role as a man. Perhaps these young boys considered their primary role as financial providers because being a man meant being able to provide financially. To be economic providers, most turned to hustling, which they described as various random jobs that made money quickly. Hustling might include selling candy in the neighborhoods, cleaning cars at intersections, and, most often, selling drugs. While money could be made promptly through these activities, it was usually inconsistent and, in terms of selling drugs, hazardous.

Engaging in these hustling activities was described as a complicated compromise between the son and the parent. Matt outlined the unspoken agreement between his mother and himself when he hustled around 16. He explained,

I split the bills with my mother and all that. (how old were you?) 15/16. (did she know where the money was coming from?) yeah. (and what were her thoughts about that?) She didn't want me doing it. But at the same time, she couldn't be mad at me because all my kids were taken care of, she was taken care of, her bills were taken care of, I was taken care of, and if I got myself locked up, I bailed myself out—that type of stuff.

Matt and his mother had to make a complicated decision. Matt's mother could ask Matt to stop hustling for money, but this would also mean fewer financial resources. Or she could look the other way and accept the risks of hustling. Given their economic strains, Matt's mother opted to look the other way to continue having the money the family needed. Matt also described a very self-sufficient mindset. He did not believe that others could bail him out or help him. Therefore as the provider of the family, it was on him to deal with the problems that might arise with his job.

For Matt and his mother, the sacrifice that came with hustling was Matt's safety. For Kwame, the sacrifice he made to provide for his family was school. Kwame explained, "I'm smart in school; it was just like at that time I didn't care no more. Like I wasn't really worrying about it because I was too busy running the street. (You were trying to provide for your family?) Right." Kwame was aware of his potential and ability to do well in school. However, because of his responsibilities as the provider, he could not put the same focus into school that he may have wanted to. Kwame's statement suggested that the participants who took up a provider role were highly motivated to provide and support their families. Being a provider can become their

purpose and motivation for success. This identity may have been challenged when they moved into emergent adulthood and their families encouraged them to create more independent lives.

Some parents may have needed these young men to get into independent life more quickly than expected. Emani, an 18-year-old Latino from the D.M. program, examined this experience with his mother. Emani had a problematic relationship with his mother and believed she would have liked him to leave the house quicker. Emani stated, "Once I got my job at McDonald's, that's when I realized that she was never gonna help me with nothing. She would not throw a penny my way for nothing." Emani's experience with his mother indicated that Emani was likely pushed into adult roles by his mother very quickly. Emani gave few reasons for this. However, a part of the reason could be that by encouraging Emani to become a financial provider for himself, his mother reduced the family's financial burdens. This may be another helpful strategy for families who need to manage minimal financial resources.

### **Violence and Incarceration**

These young boys stepped up in the family to become financial providers by turning to hustling, most often by selling drugs. As they were selling drugs, they increased their exposure to violence and the potential to be incarcerated as a young person. For many of the participants, their connection with violence was traumatic. However, as they described these moments of pain, many did so with a level of acceptance, which indicated that this was a normative experience for them and the neighborhood where they worked to provide for their families. Kwame explained this sense of normalcy or desensitization when discussing the neighborhood where he grew up. Kwame expressed, "You've seen people getting killed in front of your face, you've seen people selling drugs, you've seen people just not caring, you've seen people sitting out on their porch." From what Kwame described, he spoke about a neighborhood that had so

much exposure to violence that when it happened right in front of them, neighbors did not show that they cared. This behavior may have happened for a variety of complex reasons. One reason may be the fear that they would have also been harmed if they had gotten involved. Still, this implies a high level of exposure to extreme violence and fear, which becomes ingrained in the neighborhood culture.

A particularly devastating story of violence came from Matt. Matt was hustling with his cousin when he was in his late teens. As they were driving along, his cousin was shot in the head, covering Matt in his cousin's blood. Matt recounted the story,

It's just been like that after seeing too many brains and blood and all that splattered everywhere. I['ve] seen my best friends kill themselves and shit like that. (You saw some crazy things...) That was a couple of years ago; they killed my cousin. I was in the car with him, and they blew his brains out and shot him in the chest a couple of times.

Given how matter-of-factly it was stated, Matt shared this with the interviewer with what seemed like a level of emotional repression. Unfortunately, many of these young men lost friends and family to violence like this. If they have not lost someone that way, they likely witnessed violence to this level in their neighborhood.

Being able to make sense of this kind of trauma required these boys to repress their emotional experiences and turn towards aggression to deal with their bottled feelings. The reason that they needed to do this was because they still needed to provide for their families and likely did not feel like they had the space to grieve. There were also expectations on these young boys that they work through their trauma in a masculine way. As they discussed being providers, they would call themselves the men of the house, which indicated that the idea of masculinity was mixed with what they believed their role in the home was. Thus, for these young boys,

processing the violence that they were exposed to also had ideas of hegemonic masculinity woven throughout. Disconnecting from emotional experiences and using aggression were two coping strategies that had their roots in hegemonic masculinity.

Using masculine coping strategies as a response to the violence they experienced as providers for their families was also often experienced in the home. Old Cat explained how the loss of his brother had affected the way that he trusted other people. In describing how he lost his brother, he shared, “[My] Godparents [got] high, locked him in the basement, then beat him to death and burned him, for real. You know what I'm saying, for real. I'm still fucked up in the head from that, for real.” Old Cat's brother passed because of the cruel and violent actions of family members who were meant to protect and provide for him and his brother. Old Cat learned from that experience that even family members may be unsafe. This realization that the family that these young boys were providing for could be highly unsafe created a painful tension that may not have been resolved until later in life with disconnection and time.

Emani also witnessed a violent act at the hands of a family member that altered his relationship with his family. Emani shared, “My uncle had raped my sister. So, yeah, it was like I was there, I tried to stop him and stuff, but it was like, I wasn't strong enough.” Emani's desire to protect his sister and stop his uncle represented another dimension of how these young men learn to step into adult roles in childhood. Emani and other participants felt that part of their responsibility as “man of the house” (Roy et al., 2014) was to step into the violence. This behavior might have been considered a male role. It also suggested that because of their provider roles, there might be expectations that these young boys engage in violence to protect their families, even if it is from inside their own families.

### ***Gangs***

One of the easiest ways to become a provider and start hustling was to join a gang. Most of the participants in this study were open about joining a gang or having close contact through a friend or school. In the lives of these young men, gangs played a complicated role. For many, joining a gang was a form of protection and connection that they may have felt was lacking in their home life. For others, gangs were part of the hustling game; joining a gang was a way to make money quickly.

Kendall seemed to join a gang almost unexpectedly. Kendall noted that he was a reasonably strong kid who could protect himself and others for the most part. At the time that Kendall got noticed by a gang member for his strength, Kendall was also dealing with a bully who was harassing his friend. Kendall shared this about his interaction with this gang member,

He was a pretty cool guy, but he came up to me and was like, 'You got a problem with so and so?' So I was like, 'yeah. But I'm going to handle him.' He was like, 'Don't even worry about it.' I was like, 'Whatever.' The next week, I forgot how it happened, but I got jumped into a gang.

Kendall explained that the gang member took care of the bully for him and then he was initiated into the gang. Young boys like Kendall expressed that their capacity for strength and ability to protect others was what got them noticed by a gang. DeOntte summed this well when he stated, "I was gang material—I was big, tough, I looked the part." DeOntte had to work very hard to avoid joining a gang and thanked God that he was able to prevent it. The hegemonic masculine capacity for aggression may be a contributing factor in Kendall's story about how he joined a gang.

Gangs were also the way that young men like Snoop were introduced to more masculine coping strategies such as emotional repression, aggression, or substance abuse. Snoop struggled

with substance use throughout his life. He has used marijuana for a long time as a way to cope with the violence, stress, and trauma that he had endured. It was his experiences in a gang that introduced him to this coping strategy, "I got involved with gangs, I got involved with like weed and marijuana, started drinking (when did you start?) It started when I was about 8 or so, young from 8 to 17." Having a coping strategy that began at that age and lasted for a long time made it hard for Snoop to break. In this way, gangs served as a place where young men were exposed to more masculine ways of dealing with their challenges. Gangs may have been a welcomed form of guidance for Snoop as he took on a provider role in his home.

Regardless of affiliation with a gang or not, young men still fell victim to the violence that occurred between them, such as DeOntte, who, despite being "gang material," was able to stay out of a gang. However, he painfully described the loss of his best friend as a young kid who was still too young to cross the street, getting killed in the crossfire. DeOntte shared,

And I remember witnessing my best friend get killed. Right across from Lombard, we were walking...we weren't allowed across the street because we were so young. I remember one of the gang members, the Bloods and Crypts, used to be bad back in the day.

Although it is never shared in the interview, perhaps this was the reason that DeOntte worked so hard to stay out of a gang. Despite the efforts of some participants, maybe exposure to violence was unavoidable in the neighborhoods where they grew up. This inability to avoid violent exposure suggested that part of being able to survive this period of their life was about accepting that some of this violence is expected. Becoming desensitized to violence and emotional repression were effective coping skills for managing the trauma.

### ***Death and Loss***

As young boys, participants often had their first interaction with death and loss at a young age. Their families usually operated with more intergenerational patterns because of the financial burdens. Participants frequently shared that they lived in houses with their grandparents. Being exposed to death through both violent and also non-violent ways was often confusing for them. Empire was an 18-year-old African American man who wanted to open his own seafood restaurant one day. He grew up in a very chaotic environment as a kid and spent a few years living with his grandparents when his mother got sent to jail. He shared that his grandfather could be harsh and cold but that he taught Empire how to listen. Empire's grandfather had several health issues, and when he died, Empire explained,

That was the first person I had close to me die. So, that didn't hit me like I thought it would. I didn't cry; I just stood there looking at other family [members] like, "Why are y'all cryin'?" Y'all knew how he was. Y'all knew how he wanted to die. Why cry?"

At that age, Empire did not possess the capacity to understand why the adults in his life were grieving in this way. His age may have made dealing with grief very confusing. For other participants who experienced loss at a young age, they may have had a similar experience with confusion and uncertainty.

Isaiah was a 22-year-old African American male who attended the U.P. center. At a young age, he lost his grandmother, aunt, and uncle, all within a few years of each other. As Isaiah grew older, he turned these losses into a source of comfort and support as he transitioned into adulthood, "They probably still looking down on me 'til this, from their time, "he can still make it; all he has to do is get his self together and all that". Participants turned their losses into motivating forces to change their lives and leave the circumstances they grew up in. Still, this

kind of grief often went unprocessed during childhood years because of the stress and frequency of loss for these young boys.

### ***Incarceration***

Many of the young men in this sample explained being incarcerated as a normative experience for young men their age. This was certainly true for the young men involved with a gang. Hustling for their families allowed them to make money quickly and often meant that they were “locked up” or incarcerated at least once during their adolescence, if not many more times. The participants did not share much about how they felt about being incarcerated and explained these situations rather matter-of-factly. Participants noted the ways that being incarcerated affected their ability to provide for their families and accomplish their educational requirements.

Several participants’ first exposure to incarceration was through their parents. Parental figures may have been hustling themselves, involved in abusive relationships, or been victims of a racially biased criminal justice system. For Isaiah, his first experience with incarceration came through his mother, who may have experienced racial profiling that sent her to jail.

My mother was locked up; it was 3 and a half, ‘imma have to say she was locked up 4 years because she was somewhere she wasn't supposed to be. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Isaiah went four years without being supported by his mother or having a meaningful connection with her. This also meant that Isaiah had to step into specific adult roles in his family because his parental figure could not be present. This kind of experience presented a complicated situation for many young men and their families. Parental figures who were already working multiple jobs to provide minimal financial support to their families may have been pulled away from their homes for several years, unable to continue to support their children. Then, their young men

stepped into a parental role to compensate for lost finances. If these young men were locked up, this further complicated the home's financial situation.

Fry examined this complicated situation of being a young provider for his family while dealing with the impact of being incarcerated,

That's really made me want to get out there and want to sell drugs and want to hustle.

And that's really got me in a position to get locked up, and my little brother says, like, we need clothes, shoes, all that.

Fry understood that he had to place himself at risk for being incarcerated because otherwise, his brother would have gone without necessities. His job as the man of the house was to be on the front lines. In this way, being incarcerated also meant that for the length of his stay in jail, Fry could not continue making money to make sure his brother had clothes.

Incarceration halted Fry's ability to keep his family stable. For Snoop, incarceration affected his status as a student, "I got locked up during the school year, and the lady that owned the school didn't want me to come back down there for real, and I was like, I couldn't do anything about that for real." The stigma surrounding incarcerated men prevented Snoop from returning to school after his incarceration. This stigma meant that Snoop had to move to another school, make new friends, establish himself in a new environment, and placed further stress on his family.

The effect of incarceration on these young men's lives after just one lockup was life-altering. Several young men experienced multiple lockups during their adolescence for a variety of charges. Matt explained, "I got locked up since I was a teen til now, no less than 14 times. (And what were the charges?) Domestic violence, assault, deadly weapon, and CDS possession of a deadly substance-whatever. Almost a little of everything." Fourteen times, being in and out

of jail can create a significant impact on Matt's mental health and sense of safety in the world. On top of Matt's list of charges, they also suggested an already high level of aggression and trauma that likely came from experiences that he had as a child. For young men like Matt, incarceration was the consequence that was often given to them in response to how they coped with their adult roles and extreme exposure to violence.

Much like Snoop, multiple lockups eventually affected Kwame's student status. "I mean, I had stopped going to school when I was in 11th grade because I kept getting in trouble with the police. I kept getting locked up." Outside of the stigma that Snoop faced because of his time in jail, incarceration also pulled Kwame away from his school work so often that he did not get to do the work to be able to move on to his senior year. Kwame had to attend the U.P. center to get his GED, to be able to get a job, and to make money. Multiple lockups were a significant obstacle to Kwame's transition into emergent adulthood.

Not many participants shared thoughts or insights about reintegration after being incarcerated. However, Fry noted the impact of returning to the same space and network after each lockup. Fry explained that growing up in his neighborhood, which was full of chaos and negative influences, didn't help him make the changes that he needed to.

Yeah, I can't, well you can't really blame others for your problems, but it helped. It helped a whole lot, it helped. It helped me going back and forth, getting locked up.

Coming home, being introduced to the same people again and in the same neighborhood, and nothing is changing. It helped.

Fry stated that even though he should not have blamed others for his mistakes, being around negative influences after each time he was locked up did not help him change his behavior. Fry's

story about reintegration suggested that while there may be a sincere desire to do things differently, a significant split from old environments and networks may be necessary for growth.

### **Conclusion**

From a young age, participants were exposed to extreme levels of stress. The environments where they lived were often filled with violence and required high levels of vigilance to traverse. Their parents worked multiple low-income jobs that rarely allowed them to provide more than essential resources for their children and did not always allow them to be present in the home. In response to these low socioeconomic circumstances, many young boys became providers in their homes. They were taking on adult roles as second parents, teachers, protectors, and providers for their families. Many young boys turned to hustling and violence to fill these roles. Hustling increased their exposure to stress and trauma during childhood.

Through their time hustling, many young men also experienced incarceration on multiple occasions. These lockups decreased their ability to be providers and meet their educational responsibilities, further increasing their stress and decreasing future opportunities. Through their exposure to stress and violence, the participants in this sample were placed in a state of hypervigilance that altered the way they engaged in their relationships with family and friends. To survive this state of hypervigilance, many young men relied on hegemonic masculinity as a guideline for how to cope with their trauma. These coping strategies helped them keep their heads above water and continue supporting their families despite the immense pressure.

## **Findings Chapter 2: Masculine Coping Strategies**

### **Introduction**

Growing up in disadvantaged socioeconomic environments, participants frequently assumed adult responsibilities within their households, including providing for their families. The intense urge to support their loved ones drove these young boys to rapidly partake in dangerous, illicit activities to earn money. Regrettably, these endeavors often exposed them to violence at a tender age and, for some, may have resulted in entanglement with the criminal justice system. The exposure to elevated levels of stress and fear, commonly linked with violence and the legal system, necessitated the implementation of coping mechanisms to endure.

The coping strategies developed by these young boys were expressed in different ways, with some being more detrimental than others. It seemed that many of them turned to notions of dominant masculinity to navigate through challenging and distressing experiences. Two of the most expected or normative coping strategies employed included accommodation and substance use.

### **Common Coping Strategies**

As conveyed previously, many participants began to accept or accommodate the violent nature of their environments as normative and expected. Fry was asked if he felt unsafe in his current living environment, to which he responded, “Well, I can’t say that, but not really dangerous because I done been raised to where I’m accustomed to it, so it’s really not like a danger, to me anymore. It’s more a way of life.” Part of Fry’s coping strategy was accommodating to the realities of his environment. Perhaps ignoring concerns for safety and pushing away feelings of anger or unfairness allowed Fry to move through his environment with

less mental discomfort. This way of speaking was present in other interviews, including with Matt. During his interview, Matt explained being shot,

(How old were you when you got shot?) I was 17 & 18. Cause I got shot two different times. (Do you mind if we talk about that a little later?) It don't matter to me; that's all in the past for real, so it doesn't bug me.

Matt's openness and willingness to share his experience about the two separate times that he had been attacked with a gun suggested that part of the way he had accommodated his trauma was by simply owning it. By claiming the painful experience in a confident way in front of others, he may have been able to avoid engaging with underlying feelings around these experiences. He may have been around enough violence growing up that being shot was considered developmentally normative within his peer group.

Accommodation allowed Matt and Fry to accept the realities of the environments where they grew up. This coping strategy may have been a way to acknowledge feelings of powerlessness. Another response to trauma was the use of substances. Many participants were introduced to substances as a coping strategy through gang affiliation at a young age. For some, these substances became a long-term addiction that they were still battling. Snoop explained why he was at the U.P. center getting his GED. He shared that part of the reason he stopped going to school was because of his substance use, "I started smoking heavy, heavy, heavy like every day I had to; I never went to class, never to school for real." Snoop's exposure to stress as a child was so overwhelming that he "had to" smoke every day just to keep going. Snoop still struggled with substance use when he had his interview, and it was a significant change that he was attempting to make as he moved into adulthood.

Substances like weed, alcohol, and other illicit substances provided needed mental stabilization that was not coming from their support systems at home or within themselves. Isaiah explained the impact of substance use on his schooling, "[When] I started, I was failing all, mostly all my classes. I started smoking, and that was it. Once I started smoking weed, I went downhill." Unfortunately, this particular coping skill had a lot of adverse effects on Isaiah's life that placed him in a vicious cycle. Increased stress meant more substances used to cope with overwhelming feelings. Isaiah's substance use affected his ability to do well in school, which increased the stress that he was placed under as he went to school, only furthering his need for substances to cope. Weed provided the stabilization that Isaiah needed to overcome his childhood challenges and helped him keep his head above water.

There were times when these young men could lean on relationships in their lives to help them through stressful periods or circumstances. Tyler, a 21-year-old African American who attended the U.P. center to get his GED after a series of moves during his childhood that affected his ability to graduate, described who he would turn to during middle school when he struggled with school.

I went to my teachers for help. I stayed after school and did a little more work. And teachers helped me out, a lot of teachers helped me out and stuff (so mainly your teachers). Was there anybody in your family you could go to if you need help with homework or something like that? My sisters and my brothers helped me.

The striking quality of Tyler's interview is that he expressed a sincere trust and dependence on his family members. Tyler explained far fewer experiences of traumatic exposure or issues of childhood stress. This may be why Tyler expressed the capacity to lean on others as a coping skill during childhood.

Another young man who demonstrated the use of relationships as a way to cope with painful experiences was Andrew. Andrew was a 21-year-old Latino male who attended the U.P. Center. Andrew lost a very close friend, Ced, at a young age, and that considerably changed the way that he moved through his childhood. In the process of dealing with his grief, Andrew reached out to Ced's father to share in their grief, "Talk to his father...that's about it. I'll be like, "Man, I miss Ced," and he'll be like, "I miss Ced too," and then I ended it there." Ced's father and Andrew leaned on each other to honor their shared person. This is a moment in Andrew's life where leaning on others was an effective coping strategy for navigating loss.

Death and loss were experiences that many of the participants had to cope with because of their exposure to violence. Often, this exposure was increased as participants came in contact with gangs; however, for Snoop, his connection to a gang was a meaningful relationship that helped to get him through school. Snoop was a young boy who was expected to take on a provider role at a young age, making it difficult for him to focus on things like school and having enough money. Snoop found that his affiliation with a gang helped him to manage some of these stressors.

Cause, like, I didn't have too much at the time for real like they were helping me with clothes, money, homework, they were tutoring, and it ain't really make me do nothing that a normal gang would do for real. They wouldn't make me run up on somebody and just beat [them] because they were wearing the Iverson color, like "naw [Snoop] you step away from this, this is not your fight!"

Through his association with the gang, Snoop could access valuable resources, support, and protection that would have been challenging to obtain through other means. These relationships functioned as valuable coping strategies that allowed these young men to get the emotional and

practical support they needed without isolating themselves. Still, leaning into relationships was often not the most common coping strategy. Many preferred accommodation, substance use, and even more frequently relied disconnection from self.

### **Emotional Repression as a Coping Skill**

Hegemonic masculinity includes the aspect of disconnecting from one's emotions through repression (Curtis et al., 2021). Through emotional repression, participants suppressed their genuine feelings, allowing them to cope, ultimately compromising their emotional well-being. Ignoring their genuine emotions may have provided temporary relief from stress and vulnerability. This repression could be a result of limited time and space in their relationships or because expressing emotions was viewed as a sign of weakness within the framework of hegemonic masculinity.

Actions of emotional repression took on many forms. Some presented as clearly unhealthy or evasive. Others might have been cloaked in behaviors that could be considered necessary. This concept rang true for Kwame. Kwame was a provider at heart. He loved his family and wanted to do everything he could to protect them. Kwame shared a mindset that he maintained to keep progressing, “Just to keep me going. Just to keep me moving and just keep on succeeding every day and or succeeding every month. Just keep on succeeding. Just keep succeeding.” Kwame’s mindset exemplified a young man who was incredibly driven and disciplined. However, this mindset may have functioned to push aside other emotional experiences that Kwame had as he was the provider for his family. Some of these young men avoided their emotional experiences by grounding themselves in masculine ideas of success achieved through discipline. While this mindset had much honor and could be validated through

meaningful achievement, it kept Kwame from being more open about his emotional state with others.

Traditional ideas about masculinity such as, "Be a man," "toughen up," and "Shake it off." were reflected in the stories and sentiments of Snoop and Matt. Snoop shared that when he was a young boy, his brother taught him an effective and masculine way to deal with pain, "I use to fall down and get a scrap or something my brother use to be like get up and shake it off, you don't even feel that right now." Treating pain as something that could be mentally avoided by simply not feeling it translated to how Snoop handled other emotional experiences. By electing not to feel his emotions, Snoop avoided the mental anguish of trauma and feelings of powerlessness.

Matt shared a similar sentiment when he discussed the way he felt that he had to move through the world to be protected, "If you're too soft, people are gonna get over on you. (Is that the way you want to be, though?) Yeah. (Is that the way you want your son to be?) Yeah." Matt's masculine philosophy about toughening up is something he hoped would protect his son from harm. Matt's expression came from a childhood in which being tough was an essential coping skill needed to manage the overwhelming stress he was exposed to. Unfortunately, by leaning on ideas of masculine emotional repression, these feelings did not go away.

Strategies of traditional masculine repression were also expressed through the interviews themselves. Not sharing emotional experiences with others may have been an effective way to repress emotional distress. Andrew was placed in the foster system at an early age but eventually started living with his grandmother. He explained to the interviewer that "she's [his mother] the reason why I'm in the system. Putting her hands on me. So. (Do you remember that when you were younger?) Yeah, but I don't want to talk about it." During the interview, little was shared

about Andrew's relationship with his mother or how he worked to process this event. By not sharing, Andrew maintained distance from the emotions that may have arisen if he had shared this experience with the interviewer. This is may be why many participants are disconnected from themselves, their families, and peers; sharing relationships with others may have brought up overwhelming amounts of unprocessed emotions.

One final strategy of emotional repression was to avoid thinking about experiences. Thinking about these moments of pain was expressed as a distraction when they became emergent adults. Having time to process and consider the impacts of trauma was described as a privilege. Many, like D.J., did not see the purpose of thinking about previous traumatic experiences as it was in the past and no longer mattered. DJ, a 20-year-old African American man who attended the U.P. center. D.J. was orphaned at a young age and has no memories of his parents. After going through the foster system for most of his childhood, he landed with a woman who, by all accounts, pseudo-adopted him. In D.J.'s process of trying to grow up, he believes, "I can do it, so put everything to the side, don't worry about nothing, do what you got to do to better yourself, don't let stuff come to you." D.J.'s mindset provided him with a set of blinders to the past. By blocking out distractions, he felt more capable of continuing to move toward successful adulthood.

By using emotional repression strategies, these participants were able to cope with significant stressors. Emotional repression allowed these young boys to stay focused on the tasks of providing and supporting themselves during childhood. However, emotional repression also altered the way that these young boys engaged in their relationships with their families. By relying on emotional repression to manage the extreme emotional distress that came about from the violence they were being exposed to, they may have inevitably been emotionally

disconnected from themselves. This early disconnection may have led them to disconnect from their family and peers as they moved into adulthood.

### **Aggression as a Coping Skill**

While emotional repression allowed young men to manage overwhelming feelings of emotional distress, aggression may have served as a form of physical protection, communication, and a physical release of repressed anger. Hegemonic masculinity may consider anger as one of the few acceptable emotions that men should be allowed to display. Thus, aggression was an encouraged way to navigate their issues and relationships. For the men in this study, aggression was often used in the roles of providers. Many also used aggression as a way to protect themselves in school settings.

As a coping strategy, aggression may have been a way of keeping themselves safe and able to continue functioning as a provider; aggressive behaviors were primarily meant to assert power and create defenses. However, these defenses eventually led to isolation and disconnection in the lives of many young men. It could also be a problematic coping skill to unlearn. Aggression usually played a very different role in adulthood for many of these participants. As they transitioned into emergent adulthood, participants often regretted and felt ashamed of their aggressive behaviors in childhood. As they tried to change in preparation for adulthood, they were working to leave behind these aggressive behaviors. Still, it was a way that they learned to move through their world as children and, thus, could be particularly challenging to leave behind.

Aggression in childhood was frequently described as a normative experience for the participants. Aggression was most often displayed in school settings, although it expanded into more aspects of their lives as they joined gangs. Emani explained this through a masculinity lens.

Emani didn't have a close relationship with his father and felt he had missed out on learning the critical masculine lessons that other sons would have learned from their fathers about what it meant to be a good man. However, he felt as though the more aggressive masculine qualities were things he already had. "And like, I knew, I knew, I know how to fight and stuff. You know, I had all the rough stuff." Emani suggested that most boys grow up knowing how to fight and be aggressive, even if they don't have a father to teach them. His perception of fighting would suggest that he considered aggression normal for young men.

Isaiah shared this sense of normalcy around aggressive behaviors. When asked how he would spend his summers in childhood, he compared his regular activities of the school year to the summer activities when he stated, "Same thing, played a lot of basketball, chilled with the ladies, got into a couple of fights. Just the same thing." The listing quality of this statement further supported the notion that aggression for most of these young men was an everyday experience during childhood. Unfortunately for most participants, this often affected their schooling, getting them suspended or even kicked out. D.J., who grew up using fighting to establish himself in various group homes, said, "Umm, last time I went to school, I got suspended for fighting. Umm, that was the last time I went to school." School issues were a common memory where regret arose during emerging adulthood, particularly for the young men at the U.P. center who are actively working towards obtaining their GEDs to pave the way for their futures. The missed opportunities in school because of aggressive acts often served as a source of shame.

While much of this aggression was normative for these participants, it also served a purpose. Most young men were providing for their families, and their ability to have influence and power within their lives was connected to their ability to hustle and accumulate resources.

Matt's aggression was associated with his sense of drive. When Matt was asked to explain activities he and his friends would do together, he shared "Rob people, all types of stuff. Beat up kids, whatever. (At school?) At school, on the street, wherever. (What attracted you to that?) If they had it and I wanted it, I was going to get it by all means." Matt's "get it by any means" mindset likely arose from desperation and drive to provide. Aggression remained a viable option when young men felt pressured to fulfill the role of provider.

The young boys learn to wield a certain level of power and influence as providers and protectors in their families. They also needed to generate additional power and influence to fulfill these roles. Aggression may have allowed them to exercise and acquire this power and influence. Empire, spent much of his childhood living with his grandmother and grandfather. He was placed with them after his mother got caught selling drugs and then was sent to jail. During his time in middle school, Empire noted the effect this situation had on and the anger he held,

I became a bully. I started smacking people around. Dudes, females, I really didn't care. Take whatever I wanted. I just kept getting bigger and stronger. (How do you think having a name for yourself affected you in school?) It gave me a differentiability- is that even a word? Because I could do things other people couldn't. I could help out people who needed to be helped out. That was somewhat of a leadership characteristic in me.

Empire's transition into a bully may have come from his anger and resentment. Still, Empire's aggression allowed him to move through his school in a way that likely mirrored the roles and expectations he was fulfilling at home and on the streets. His aggression allowed him to protect others and help those he cared about in the way he could not protect his mother. Empire perceived his aggression as an essential part of his ability to be a leader.

Sometimes, being a leader or having influence was less about the actual fighting and more about how the young man was perceived by his peers. Steffan, an 18-year-old African American male who attended the U.P. center, eventually left school and decided not to return for about two years because of records that never got transferred. During those two years, Steffan spent much of his time on the streets, and around the age of 15 or 16, he decided to “wise up.”

Are you gonna run away from anything? So, at that time, I started to establish my ‘dominance.’ That’s what I kept calling it. I kept saying, ‘I gotta establish my dominance.’ I can’t keep running. So, whenever an altercation did come up, I didn’t run; I just sat there. Most of the time, I didn’t even have to fight.

Steffan learned that part of the power of aggression and hegemonic masculinity lied in posturing. Being able to look aggressive or have a reputation for being tough was a strong enough influence to keep himself safe during those two years while he wasn’t in school. Also, Steffan’s statement included ideas about what he believed it means to be a man. Steffan supposed that being a man meant facing your battles head-on and having an air of strength. This perception of what strength as a man looked like created powerful narratives of self-sufficiency as these participants became emergent adults.

Isaiah captured these ideas more broadly when he discussed posturing about his neighborhood and peer group, “People out there fighting, fussing and fighting. It can be for a reason, but at the same time, it’s not for a reason; [they] want to show off.” Aggression served as a way to posture in traditionally masculine spaces. Therefore, that type of aggression may be something that these participants felt they would be required to participate in, to make sure that they fit in with their peer groups. Thus, aggression served as a protective benefit for these young boys in social situations.

While posturing may have served as a social protection or a way to gain influence, sometimes participants used aggression to protect themselves. In Empire's case, he was the bully; for Kendall, he was bullied. During middle school, he would get into fights and, because of this, would get suspended; in high school, he learned how to use his aggression to reduce fights from happening, "I learned to use my temper against people, so people would leave me alone. I never really got into that many problems." Despite his rocky experience in middle school, Kendall's aggression allowed him to go through high school with fewer problems. Kendall's temper put other people at a distance so that he could tune out potential distractions and focus on his education. Aggression became very useful because it allowed him to be isolated from others during high school.

Kwame shared a similar story when he explained why he began to have so much trouble in middle school. Up to this point, Kwame had been a good student. He was on time for classes, completed homework, and got along well with others. Then he began to be bullied and, in response to this, started getting into fights.

But it was like the first day up there, there was a bully. And he thought was gonna bully me and like my mother and them knew that for in order to me to step out of my curtain like that, somebody would have to mess with me to the point that they really made me mad. So that's why I was getting in trouble.

For other young men like Kwame, using aggression may not be easy. Kwame felt that he was justified in his aggression because it allowed him to protect himself. These young men were exposed to high levels of violence and stress nearly every day of their childhood. Aggression as a coping skill was a natural response to the sense of danger that was present in their lives.

Changing those behaviors and feeling safe in the world may have required disconnection from past environments and experiences.

Unfortunately, they needed to protect themselves not just at school but also in the home. Several participants experienced abusive relationships with fathers, mothers, and relatives. Snoop explained a particularly charged interaction with his father after he and his mother had moved back in because of unstable housing concerns. Snoop confronted him about not pulling his weight around the house, which may have been especially charged for Snoop, given that he had to hustle to provide for his family.

We have to fight over the simple fact [that] you never do nothing for the house, but we do more for your house, and it's not our house. He got an attitude over that and pushed me down the steps. I ran back up the steps and punched him in his mouth.

Snoop fought back against his father because his father was hurting him. Snoop wanted his father to go grocery shopping that day, but his father pushed back against the request. Snoop and other participants pushed aside a lot of their expectations about how much their parents would be able to do for them. Snoop's ability to rely on his father should have been a simple request, but it turned into a dangerous fight. Snoop fought back to express his anger and protect himself.

Knowing that he needed to use his anger to be in a relationship with his father is part of why Snoop had difficulty trusting others. Aggression could be a handy coping skill for a variety of reasons; it helped these young men fit in, protect themselves, be able to provide for their families and served as a release of repressed feelings. Still, this anger affected many of their relationships with others and was often a characteristic they felt they needed to change as they transitioned to adulthood. Duarte's coping skill of aggression is something that he is working on now to overcome, "I easily get mad. (Yeah.) I need to change that. But I'm changing that. I need

to. (So patience, not get angry.) Yes.” Being quick to anger was be challenging to let go of when learning to establish independence. Aggression may be less accepted in adult situations and hurt when a young man tries to get a job.

Both emotional repression and aggression served as coping skills in response to extreme stress. However, the provider role often becomes a sense of purpose or identity for most participants that shaped their goals and aspirations for the future. Scuba, an 18-year-old Latino male who attended the D.M. program, was asked to explain what a successful adult or transition to adulthood would look like to him, “(So what, so success would mean having a family, having kids, what else?) Getting paid enough money to support them, yeah. (A little house?) Uh, yeah, I need a house. I’m gonna get a house.” Scuba is somewhat unique in that he didn’t experience that much adultification. He has a close relationship with his family and didn’t share much exposure to stress as a child. Still, at 18 years old, his idea of a successful adult is being able to be a provider for his family. Many other participants mirrored this idea, wanting to start a family soon and be able to protect and provide for them. This identity as a provider may oppose emergent adulthood's developmental needs and expectations.

## **Conclusion**

It was common for young boys to manage the effects of exposure to stress through coping skills such as substance use, emotional repression, and aggression. They were exposed to more violence and stress mainly because they were hustling or simply because of the areas where they lived. Participants engaged in hustling activities because they were often providers in their families, primarily for themselves or their whole family. Low socioeconomic circumstances usually meant their parents could not or, in some cases, would not provide for them.

As these young men transitioned into emergent adulthood, new expectations of independence and future goals began to arise. Some participants looked forward to the freedom of adulthood, while others were strongly encouraged by their families to start their adult lives. For most young men, complicated questions and dynamics came with transitioning into adulthood. How would they balance their continued roles as providers for their families while beginning to establish themselves more independently? What did it mean that they were no longer expected to care for others and had to start focusing on themselves? How would they successfully distance themselves from toxic or harmful environments without completely disconnecting from family and friends, given that they may still have needed practical support? These are some of the tensions that were present in their relationships as they begin to navigate the transition into adulthood.

### **Findings Chapter 3: Resolving a Relational Bind through Disconnection**

#### **Introduction: Defining the Relational Bind**

During emergent adulthood, the young men in the study described a unique sense of relational tension within their relationships with family and friends. The stress of their childhood frequently put them in a state of survival mode where coping strategies like emotional repression and aggression altered the way that they engaged in relationships with family and friends. Many participants were adultified and put in provider roles that became a source of motivation and purpose. As they moved into emergent adulthood, desires to create independent lives as well as expectations from family members about being more self-sufficient began to change the dynamics of their relationships with their family members and peers.

Many participants felt like this transition into adulthood signaled a need to change their attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics significantly to protect their futures. In the process of trying to change, participants faced a relational bind. In many ways, they still needed support and help from family and peers, but to make the change, they needed to break from the negative influences that were coming from family and friends. Thus, they had to make compromises regarding the amount of help they were willing to ask for to protect their growth. There may also have been considerations of emotional safety, given the complicated nature of their family relationships. Leaving some young men with complicated negotiations about how much of their emotional experience they could share without getting hurt.

For other young men, this relational bind presented itself in the way that they still felt obligated to their families as their providers. They wanted to continue supporting their family but struggled to understand how they could do that while still developing their independent lives. For all participants, the process of becoming an adult was influenced by expectations of what it

meant to become a man. Masculine norms about independent achievement meant that sometimes participants avoided asking for needed help because it may have reflected poorly on their status as men.

In some ways, this relational tension exists for most emergent adults. Part of emergent adulthood is learning how to navigate independent achievement with the compromises and vulnerabilities that come with being in relationships (Arnett, 2004). For emergent adults, with the resources needed to launch from their homes, an inherent distance is placed between themselves and their family and friends (Roy & Jones, 2014). The physical distance may be helpful as they process any tension in their relationships. For the men in this study, the resources needed to launch were not within their reach because of low socioeconomic circumstances; therefore, many were still connected with their friends and family members. Consequently, they were not able to create emotional or physical distance through college. The young men in this sample, were also more likely to face issues of poverty, incarceration, and adultification, which increased their exposure to stress in childhood and further complicated their relationships with family and friends.

These childhood stressors required that participants worked to strike a balance, in emergent adulthood, between the way they developed their independent adult lives and their relationships with friends and family. This balance was often difficult for participants and created a certain amount of tension or uncertainty within themselves. This tension will be referred to as a relational bind.

One such participant who navigated this relational bind was Steffan. Steffan had just gotten his GED through the U.P. center and was considering going to college in Georgia in order

to be closer to his son. When asked how he felt about being able to get his GED, he explained the complicated nature of his achievement.

See, I don't know how I feel about it because I take it like I did it all by myself. I got myself enlisted down here; I did it all on my own. I think that's a bad way to think about it because there were people who did help me, maybe more. Sometimes, it can be challenging because I say I did it all by myself, but then they are like, 'You are crazy; you didn't do it all by yourself.'

Steffan's words suggested that he is grappling with this relational bind. He asks how much of his achievement he can give himself credit for. Did the support he received play a more significant role than he is honoring? Or should he be able to take all the credit? These questions reflected his need to feel like he had achieved something independently as a man, while still acknowledging the support he received.

Many participants were often placed in adult roles to support their families. Those roles prepared them for independence at a young age. DJ held a provider role in his family system and felt obligated to continue operating as a provider in emergent adulthood. DJ explained this aspect of a relational bind as it related to his future goals. "I'm trying to pick up the slack that they're throwing, doing what I'm trying to do to help them and help my family, and I'm still trying to get mine at the same time." As DJ moved into adulthood, he was working out how he would continue to play that role while also beginning to make moves towards his independence. This complicated dual task may have made it more challenging for D.J. to establish his sense of manhood.

For other young men in the sample, independence is the only viable option in the face of family instability. Isaiah shared another layer of the relational bind these men may have been

experiencing in emergent adulthood. Isaiah described how he had noticed his family encouraging his sense of independence by slowly pulling their support away. Isaiah indicated that he might have perceived this process as a harsh but essential lesson, stating, "I kind of get[s] it, but I don't "get it" get it, but I get it. People in this world right now will or will not live. Everybody that you know is not going to be around forever." Many of these men have experienced much instability and death in their childhood years. There may have been a sense that counting on others was not an intelligent way to move through the development of independence because it was uncertain who would still be around. Isaiah's statement suggested that in his consideration of the relational bind, he leaned more toward self-sufficiency rather than being seeking help from his family and friends.

While Isaiah could see the importance of building independence as his parents removed support, Kendall's experience with a hospital bill suggested a different perspective on this transition. After four years of not getting sick, Kendall got ill for the first time in a while and was charged with a hospital bill. When he turned to his family for support on how to handle his hospital bill with the collection agency, his family expected him to manage it on his own. He felt that they had thrown him into the deep end. He shared, "I don't know what to do; I don't know who to go to. It got confusing. At this moment now, when [my family] want[s] to control my life, [they] don't want to control it when I really need [their] help." Kendall felt that his family removed support too quickly and incorrectly. Kendall's experience with his family suggested that his family may have not clearly understood when to give support versus when an opportunity for independent learning may have arisen. It may also indicate that the relational bind depends on the type of help or the situation that was encountered. Some young men may have felt

comfortable handling a hospital bill more independently, while others may have wished to still rely on their relationships for support.

If a young man did not feel he had the support to navigate emergent adulthood, leaning into self-sufficiency may have been his only option for a successful transition. One of Old Cat's talents is songwriting. He enjoys explaining his experience as a young man through his lyrics. When discussing a song he wrote called "I'm Just Waiting My Turn," Old Cat described how he felt he was perceived on his journey of change into emergent adulthood by others. Having made a stark break from the past, Old Cat was disconnected from his previous life. He stated,

When you used to be in the streets and ain't get caught or nothing, and then soon as you're done with that [life]style for real, it's just like, people still looking down on you. and I just was like, damn! I might as well have just kept doing what I been doing.

Old Cat's description of his transition from his old life to his new one seemed to suggest the way he was perceived by friends and family, further complicated how he moved through emergent adulthood. It may have felt difficult for Old Cat to lean on others when he felt like his choices were not supported. For Old Cat, it may have been better to disconnect from his relationships because they were negative influences on his road to change. Old Cat's solution to the relational bind that he experienced from his friends and family was to tune out distractions and rely on self-sufficiency as a way to move into adulthood. Unfortunately, leaning farther into self-sufficiency may have increased a sense of isolation.

More isolating behaviors such as a lack of trust may also play a role in navigating the relational bind. Empire described his feelings about reaching out for help or support from others as he navigated a potential college experience. He explained "...I don't like people in my business. People who want to help you, want to know exactly why you're asking for help, and

they don't need to know everything; I just need [their] help. That's all they need to know...".

Empire's desire for privacy because of his lack of trust in others affected the way he managed his relational bind. His value of privacy meant that he was more disconnected from his relationships with others.

Empire's words explained how some young men may navigate this relational bind regarding intimacy. Empire preferred that others did not know much about him. As Old Cat described, this may be an effective strategy for avoiding judgment or potential hurt. As Isaiah has explained, it may also be a way of staying detached from relationships, especially if they cannot be counted on. Empire's desire for relational distance allowed him to ask for help without the potential obligation and drama that may have come with being in a more connected relationship. Despite the potential coping strategy, it may be an isolating way of moving through emergent adulthood.

In regards to the masculine or adulthood imperatives of independence, many of these men might be more relationally inclined than stereotypes would suggest (Mahalik et al., 2003; Seidler et al., 2019). Steffan described this sense of isolation as he explained how he motivated himself to keep changing and growing by thinking about the relationships that matter to him. He shared, "But it's hard to struggle by yourself. You know, just to struggle and not to see anybody. I come home every day wishing that I could come home to my son and my girlfriend. It's like a dream...". In Steffan's statement, there seemed to be a longing for connection and love. His desire to see his son and his girlfriend suggested that there is an innate need for connection. Still, the potential impact of the complexities of relationships that can come with demands, obligations, and emotional drain may have kept participants from acting on this innate desire for closeness.

The contrast between Empire and Steffan's statements highlighted the natural tension within the relational bind. Empire's words suggested a man who wants to limit his sense of intimacy and reliance on others, while Steffan longed for deeper connection and support as he was on the road to change. However, both of them faced similar imperatives and goals: their success as men and as adults was marked by independent achievement, self-sufficiency, and their ability to provide stability. The relational bind seemed to be composed of several dimensions and was deeply affected by ideas of hegemonic masculinity. Being able to navigate the push and pull of each side may have been crucial as these emergent adult males navigated the developmental challenges of moving into adulthood.

### **Distancing and Disconnection from Family**

As these young men considered the transition into adulthood, many seemed to connect the idea of becoming an adult to becoming a man. In this way, their experiences in emergent adulthood were about both manhood and adulthood. Several of these young men considered becoming a man an independent task. In order to reach this status, they must have gotten there on their own. To get there on their own, some men may have relied on behaviors that distanced and disconnected them from other people in their lives.

One factor that seemed to be a significant indicator of manhood and adult success for the participants was the ability to get and keep a job. A job was considered a safe and stable way to gather financial resources. These financial resources often meant increased ability to provide for their families and friends. For some young men, it seemed essential to achieve this level of financial stability independently. Independent arrival at financial stability likely came from messages of hegemonic masculinity that encouraged hyper-independence and self-sufficiency.

However, it may also have led to more isolated pathways through emergent adulthood. When asked what it meant to have a job, Young One shared,

That you can do stuff for yourself, you feel me. Like you ain't got to depend on no one that can do it for you. Because you know how to do it on your own, for real, and then you gotta stand on your own two feet and be a man, for real.

Young One explained the connection between adulthood and masculinity well. In his statement, there is a strong desire to accomplish this task of becoming a man by himself. Young One does not seem to believe he can lean on others as he transitions. He believe that he would have successfully become a man by going through this process independently.

Hegemonic masculinity proposed that one of the primary strategies to manage discomfort in relationships was to create distance and disconnect from the people who are causing the challenges to progress. Both distancing and disconnection reduced relational distress and functioned as a type of boundary. These behaviors often helped these young men feel like they could better manage their transition into manhood. Still in these behaviors they may have also cut off valuable resources and support.

### ***Distancing***

Many young men engaged in both distancing and disconnection. Distancing in relationships was captured in acts of placing physical, emotional, or cognitive space between the participant and another person, or even a broader system like school. Masculinity encouraged distancing behaviors as a way for young men to manage the challenges that may have arisen in various scenarios. Distancing allowed these young men to protect themselves from harm, embarrassment, or hurt. Isaiah described the way that he used distancing actions in order to manage his difficulties with learning. "A lot of times, getting frustrated in school, and I'd leave.

I'd leave. Like, if I'm in school and we're doing work and there's something I don't understand, I just get up and walk out of class." Leaving was a valuable strategy to stop what may have been an overwhelming situation for Isaiah. Given Isaiah's pressures as a kid, school was something that often felt like a second priority to being able to support his family. It would make sense that as he struggled with completing his schooling, his solution for difficulty in the classroom would be to leave.

Leaving a space can also be a helpful strategy for developing independence. Young One explained how he operated with his aunt as he lived with her. He stated that she referred to him as the 'disappearing man.' He went on to share, "I'd disappear and then pop back up, and then she'd be wondering like I don't even know what he's doing, you feel me." Young One's relationship with his aunt may have been unstable. At one point, he sold drugs to her; at another, his aunt let him go into foster care because he got locked up with drugs. Young One explained that his relationship with his aunt served mostly as a place to sleep for the night. Putting distancing between himself and his aunt may have been necessary given the difficulties and inconsistency of the relationship.

Young One and Isaiah's statements gave a perspective on distancing behaviors in specific circumstances. Still, these distancing behaviors can be more subtle and general. In the case of Emani, he described a type of mental distancing when he engaged with new people. Emani stated, "I always try to like watch my own back kinda thing. So I mean, at first, I'm gonna be friendly, of course, but if I don't get the right vibe or something, I'll be defensive, of course." Emani's statement suggested that he may begin with a general sense of friendliness or expected kindness. However, his defensiveness remains primed if he gets the sense that something might

be off with another person. By keeping a defense mechanism nearby when meeting new people, Emani prepared to distance himself more implicitly.

### ***Disconnection***

All of these behaviors could be boiled down to how space is placed between the young men and the challenges they are having in their lives, whether physical, cognitive, or emotional distance. Emotional distance was better defined as a process of disconnection. Disconnection was closely related to distancing and may have resulted from distancing behaviors.

Disconnection happened when a sense of closeness, intimacy, or obligation to another person was reduced or entirely halted. Disconnection may have decreased these young men's sense of obligation to their families and friends as they move toward greater independence in adulthood. Kendall noticed this kind of disconnection as he described why he and his previous girlfriend had split and why he had stopped dating for at the moment. He stated, "Now, I'm not really focused on dating anyone, to be honest with you. I don't have time for that. She used to tell me, too, I'm not emotionally there, which is understandable. I'm really not." Kendall understood that he needed to be more emotionally present to be in a meaningful relationship. Being disconnected emotionally prevented Kendall from being able to continue in that previous relationship. Kendall explained that he focused more on getting a job and establishing himself as an adult.

During this transition into independence, other people might be considered a distraction. Old Cat further remarked on this idea when he explained his philosophy around managing relationship difficulties. Old Cat stated, "And I always say: My words will hurt a person before my hands will. You know, and what I mean by that is if you cross me, I just cut you off completely." Old Cat employed what appears to be a strict and fast rule around relationship

challenges. With Old Cat, if a mistake was made, that was the end of the relationship. A complete disconnection from the person and the relationship that was shared.

For some of these young men, a complete cut-off may be difficult given their often-unstable housing situation. Andrew described a relationship with his father that, at a young age, was very strained from neglect. As he grew up, he and his father returned to each other's lives. However, Andrew still maintained a sense of emotional disconnection from his father to protect himself. Andrew explained,

I keep it short with him, my [father] and stuff cause I deal with [him], but at the same time I try not to because I can't forgive him, how you gonna try to come in my life? I'll never, I'll never forgive him for that. At the same time, I deal with it. It is what it is...just got to move on in life.

In this way, Andrew was still connected with his father, a relationship that he accepted to a degree. However, Andrew maintained that he would not fully re-engage in his relationship with his father by not forgiving him. Andrew demonstrated a complicated process of disconnection that helped him make sense of the relational bind within his relationship with his father.

This process of disconnection sometimes continued to more extreme levels. If disconnection were considered a spectrum, extreme closeness might be placed at one end with "giving up on the world" placed at the other. This end of the spectrum could be understood as a sense of disconnection that went beyond specific people and led to isolation from most, if not all, relationships. This level of disconnection likely came from a place of deep hurt and broken trust within these young men. Which may have led them to feel that they were better off not engaging with the world.

Not engaging in the world often referred to distancing behaviors like leaving when things got challenging or, in Fry's case, never going. Fry stated, "So it's like, wow, how do I deal with it? Fuck it. I'm just not gonna go. That's the best way to deal with it—not to go". Fry seemed to share that it was better not to even try. By pulling out from the race before it even began, Fry could disconnect from something that may have had the potential to hurt or disappoint him.

While for Fry, the intention to disconnect was perhaps more related to his faith in others, Old Cat's reason for disconnection seemed more related to his faith in himself. Old Cat seemed to have experienced several traumatic events throughout his lifetime. In his opinion, this has caused significant changes to his mind. Old Cat stated,

But my mind is fucked up, for real, for real. (when you say your mind is fucked up, like what?) It's just like you don't care. You just worry about yourself cause you feel as though everybody is out to, you know what I mean, cross you for real.

Old Cat noticed this level of disconnection came from deeper-rooted lack of trust in others. He may have attributed this lack of trust to the way his brain operated after all the painful experiences he has gone through. The ability to disconnect more broadly may have served Old Cat as a way to tune out potential negative influences or distractions as he moved into adulthood.

In many ways, Empire may share this sentiment. Empire stated, "I feel like I could fucking care less...But getting over that barrier of not worrying about what other people think. If I can get over that, there's really not too much I can't do." For Empire, letting go of what other people thought about him opened up the possibilities for success and growth. Empire's statement suggested that some men feel that their relationships with friends and family were hindering their progress. Perhaps disconnection and complete cut-offs resolved some of the challenges and tensions that had arisen while navigating relationships with family in emergent adulthood.

Hegemonic masculinity encouraged the use of distancing and disconnection actions to manage relationship challenges. For these young men, those challenges may have been in considering how they were expected to become more independent and still fulfill substantial provider roles in their families. As these young men negotiate roles they fulfilled in their families and the growing need for independence, some young men used disconnecting strategies to disconnect from their families. This disconnection from family may have been a crucial way they resolve the complexity of their relationships with their families. They described various strategies for disconnecting from their obligation or roles to their families.

### **Disconnection from Family**

This distancing period might have been considered more normative and healthier for some young men. Healthy relationships with families often involve boundaries, individual spaces, and individual identities. Successful separation from family is a process known as differentiation (Fosco et al., 2012). In this process, children work to establish their independent sense of self and begin to pull away from their families and parents (Arnett, 2004). Kendall shared an example of this process of differentiation as he described how his mother tried to parent him differently than his older brother. Kendall explained that growing up, his parents may have held on too closely, and now, as he is growing up, Kendall wanted more space.

Ok, my mom tries to control his life. And he just entirely pushed away from them because of that. I guess they realize they wouldn't do the same thing with me. But at the same time, they don't realize that they're trying to put it on tighter. Like they're wrapped around me tighter. I'm like, don't do that; it's not going to work. Just relax. It's not that serious.

Kendall's description of differentiation provided an insight into what seemed like a normative process of differentiation. Kendall wanted more space to develop his sense of independence and may have been pushing against the anxiety of his parents' parenting process. Differentiation is an experience that most teenagers and emergent adults will eventually go through as they navigate transitions between developmental periods (Fosco et al., 2012).

The reduced need for parental guidance and support may have marked this transition between developmental periods. There may have been expectations from the young men that they were going to rely on their parents less. Steffan explained this when he stated, "And your father can't keep guiding you because he's not going to be there forever. So, how are you going to make your own decisions if you always depend on your father?" Steffan demonstrated that there may be a healthy level of disconnection from a family during emergent adulthood. That level of disconnection or differentiation could have prepared young men for situations that require more independent thinking in adulthood. Therefore, emergent adults may have expected a certain level of disconnection from family. Family may have similar expectations of healthy disconnection.

### ***Reduced Sharing Conversations***

However, hegemonic masculinity often took this process of disconnection from family to greater extremes, with expectations of elevated self-sufficiency. The interviews showed several examples of, more specifically, masculine forms of disconnection. One of these more masculine strategies of disconnection was a reduction in sharing conversations. Young men explained that they seemed to share less with the crucial people in their lives about the inner workings of their minds, feelings, or even their day-to-day experiences. When asked about reaching out to parents

for support, Esteban shared that he rarely shared with his parents anymore and seemed to find it easier not to talk about what is on his mind. He stated,

I really don't talk to them, but they really don't know what to say. They are like, "What should I say?" they usually come up with dumb answers, and I'll be like, "Oh. Thank you." Just so I won't make them feel bad, I'll say, "Thank you for helping me," but I'm like, that was no help.

As Esteban navigated into adulthood and explored changing dynamics with his parents, he seemed to feel that their advice was no longer serving him. Instead of sharing his perception of their advice, he chose to placate them and reduce his conversations. By sharing less, Esteban was disconnecting from his parents to manage the relational challenge he was experiencing with them.

This disconnection from parents was mirrored in Steffan's remarks about being able to talk to his parents. He seemed to weakly state that he currently does not share things with his dad and only sometimes with his mom when he said, "(Ok, do you talk to your dad about problems or whatever you got going on or not really?) Not really. (Or your mom?) Sometimes." Steffan's interview was filled with reflection and thoughtful statements about his experience as a young man. Yet when asked about his sharing relationship with his parents, he seemed to have much less to say. A lack of statements may have indicated that he has taken action to disconnect from his parents, such as sharing less with them.

This process may happen more subconsciously. However, Empire's statement about talking to his mom less implied that he was aware of it. Empire stated, "We don't talk like we should. Cause certain things she's not gonna tell me and certain things I'm not gonna tell her". Empire's words about not talking how they "should" suggested that this disconnection he felt

with his mom is not something that he felt was ideal. In this case, it seemed both parties withheld information from each other. The parents also enacted part of the process of disconnection. A part of hegemonic masculinity and emergent adulthood is that young men are expected to have greater self-sufficiency (Kimmel, 2018). Therefore, parents from a young age may begin to push their boys to stand independently. Part of the disconnection process from family is how parents share less with their sons. This sense of parents pulling away from these young men may have further complicated the relationship between the participants and their families. Thus, disconnection may have served as a helpful way to cope with the increasing sense of confusion or relational bind.

### ***Lack of Trust in Family Members***

For some young men, this confusion may have been rooted in a more profound mistrust of their family members. Sometimes experiences with family members were hurtful and even abusive. Disconnecting from family may have been the best way to keep themselves out of harm's way, whether emotionally, mentally, or even physically. Empire explained this sentiment clearly when he identified that family members are still human; he stated,

Cause, like, I don't care how much good you put out there on the outside, you're still human. You still can fuck over anybody. So what's the difference? Family or not. Family would mess you over worse than your friends would cause they know you.

Empire's final words in this statement seemed to suggest that families were in a notably more powerful place to cause harm to these young men than perhaps other people in their lives. That experience of being deeply known by other people may have felt too vulnerable for these young men because of the abuse they have endured at the hands of family members. Therefore, during

emergent adulthood, when these young men had more ability to gain resources without a family, disconnecting from family members was the best way to escape continued pain.

The pain some of these young men had to endure may be something they had to accept at the time. Old Cat explained a complicated relationship with an uncle who used to beat him when he was a child. Old Cat shared, "I still accept the fact that you're my uncle, but your days of putting your hand on me are over, son. (he used to beat you?) He tried to pound me up. Tough love and everything." Old Cat's description of his uncle suggested that this relationship still has tricky complexities.

On the one hand, Old Cat seems required to accept that this uncle was still alive because he is part of his family. On the other hand, because Old Cat is now an emergent adult, he does not have to continue to weather the tough love. Old Cat's experience with his uncle clarified why it can be difficult for some young men to trust their family members.

Unfortunately, this lack of trust may have been so pervasive that it extended to the next generation. Matt goes so far as to say that a lack of trust extended to his young son. Matt stated, "I don't trust nobody. I don't even trust my son for real sometimes. (Really? how so?) Cause, I done seen so many people get crossed by whoever, I don't trust nobody." Matt had reached a point where even trusting a child may seem risky. This intense lack of trust helped explain why a disconnection from family may have felt essential for navigating relationships in emergent adulthood.

## **Conclusion**

In emergent adulthood, participants described a type of relational bind between their obligations or connections to family and their increasing need for independence. Many participants explained a sense of uncertainty about how they would navigate this relational bind.

Most relied on masculine coping strategies like distancing behaviors and emotional disconnection to help them resolve this bind despite innate desires for connection and closeness.

Navigating relationships in emergent adulthood, especially with family, presented considerable challenges for these young men. Some were still in provider roles, and disconnecting from their families allowed them to get the necessary space to establish themselves as self-sufficient young men. Some participants had complicated histories with their families that they were unable to entirely disconnect from because they lacked the resources needed. Thus, they continued connections with family but with reduced intimacy. In this situation, these men found ways to disconnect emotionally rather than physically to protect themselves from further harm. The masculine strategy of disconnection from family may have effectively generated a sense of independence and safety. In navigating the relational bind with family members, participants relied on distancing and disconnection to resolve the tension.

## **Chapter 4: Making a Break from the Past into Self-Sufficiency**

### **Introduction**

Many of these young men may have similarly complicated relationships with their peers as they did with family. Perhaps they felt obligated to them because of shared struggles or a sense of brotherhood through a gang. Perhaps they even saw their peers as potential obstacles to their growth and change. As these young men found ways to become self-sufficient, they might have felt as though they need to break from their past to protect their future, especially as it pertained to their relationships with their peers

In their childhood, many of these young men turned to illegal activities, such as selling drugs, joining gangs, or hustling in order to provide for their families. Now, as they were encouraged to move into adulthood, these illegal activities put their future in harm's way. Therefore, in becoming adults, they needed to make significant changes in their behaviors, character, and goals. For these young men, that often came with disconnecting from their friends who were still engaged in those illegal activities. This process might be considered a break from the past.

### **Break from the Past: Disconnection from Peers**

Isaiah powerfully described this concept when he explained how he would transition into adulthood and what would be required to do that. Isaiah stated, "You going have something to look back on, but then at the same time, you do not 'cause all the stuff you did in the past; that's in the past. You just got to start a whole new present." Isaiah's words suggested that breaking from the past was about completely letting go of the past. Regardless of the good memories, Isaiah may have felt like his past was something he had to leave behind. His ideas were mirrored in Mano's statement about wanting to start fresh in adulthood: "I want to leave everything in the

past already and kinda move on from any problem I had with anybody in the past." Mano's expression about leaving everything behind suggested that a significant disconnection from friends and peers was necessary or even desired to break from the past.

The primary reason for wanting to make a break from the past was a desire and possibly a need to change their character, actions, and behavior. Most of these young men described the need to change more generally, perhaps as a need to better themselves. There was a sense from their interviews that how they were operating in the world in their youth would have jeopardized the future that they were envisioning. Snoop described this desire to better himself when he explained why he had to leave his gang. He stated,

I am a gang member till the day I'm not associated like I told them like I told my old G and all them, like I got to space myself from yall right now I just need to better myself. And humbly enough not, they respected that for real, like I feel you you want to, you gonna finish school like somebody really trying to do something with their life, and they are proud of that for real.

Snoop's gang expressed a feeling of pride and a vote of encouragement for their member by allowing him to disconnect from their brotherhood. Snoop's decision to leave the gang indicated that continued connection with the gang would become an obstacle to the kind of life that he was trying to build in adulthood.

A desire to have a different life or even build a career was mirrored in Young One's statement about his affiliation with a gang. Young One stated, "Cause I'm a Blood, but I just can't, that drug game aint right, and I aint trying to go back to it for real. I'm trying to be a mechanic..." Young One's desire to become a mechanic meant putting aside his connection with his gang and stop hustling. Leaving a gang may have included a disconnection from friends and

peers that was extremely meaningful to the young men in the sample. These young men may have developed friendships that protected and provided for them from at a young age. Thus, choosing between friendships and a career suggested a painful form of disconnection and perhaps a strong motivation to be able to make that break.

While Young One and Snoop's reason for breaking from the past seemed rooted in a desire for a career or a more stable future, others may have wished to challenge normative expectations. When Steffan described his reason for breaking from the past, he discussed wanting to break stereotypes and defy expectations. Steffan explained,

I don't want to be like the next dude, like the next person in my family, not to make it, not to do nothing, not to depend on the next family member. Not that that family member shouldn't help them but you should be trying to do something for yourself. Not to be like my average friends on the street.

Steffan's words spoke to a desire to stand out from his peers. He even seemed to believe that self-sufficiency was considered above average. These words about not depending on family spoke to the theme of masculine self-sufficiency as a mark of adulthood. Perhaps to have transitioned to adulthood, a young man must have arrived at this destination independently. Steffan's break from the past through his disconnection from his peers, was about the road he felt he must walk to adulthood.

### ***The Impact of the Justice System***

This somewhat undefined desire to change seemed to appear around 18 for many of the young men in this study. An age cut-off was likely connected to their experience with the justice system. As these young men engaged in illegal activities at young ages to provide for themselves and their families, the punishments may have been more lenient. However, once these young

men reached 18, the punishment for crimes jeopardized their futures in ways they could not return from. Consequently, many of these young men's desire to break from the past came from their concerns about being punished through the justice system.

When Tyler was being asked about the reasons behind his break from the past, he explained, "I'm doing good right now, and it's a bad idea getting arrested, going to jail, having a charge for something I did not do, or being in jail for life. I don't want none of that to happen." Tyler's words expressed a sincere concern and fear of being caught in a situation that could land him in jail. Tyler's worries extended to potentially just being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Tyler was likely grappling with concerns about how the justice system perceives him as an African American male. Similar to most men of color, Tyler could have been incarcerated because of the color of his skin. Therefore, he needed to break from the past because even being around a place that could get him in trouble would be life-altering.

DJ expressed a very similar concern when asked about his day-to-day life. He explained that he rarely went out of his house and did not want to get to know his neighborhood. DJ stated, "I'm not gonna go out and see how it is cause I'm not trying to get in no trouble." DJ's fears of risking his future seemed to stop him from going outside his house. This may have limited his sense of freedom and independence. Two things that were crucial to developing during emergent adulthood. However, because the threat of the justice system was too significant, DJ was not willing to risk it.

As these young men were working to develop their independent lives and explore the freedoms of their age, they may have felt that they could not return to previous friend groups because it would endanger their futures. Snoop explained this experience when he stated,

Like call people up and see they going to do and get into like if we just want to chill on the block just geek for a while or we just want to go out and see how many females we can get or something like that, any other thing, I don't really mess with nothing that can endanger me for real around there, like I don't sell drugs or none of that.

Snoop's decision not to hang out with his friends because of the activities they were engaged in and the subsequent way that may have put him at risk suggested that part of the break from the past comes from a fear of the justice system.

This concern with the potential ramifications on their future through the justice system may prompt some generative and protective guidance. Kwame described how he encouraged the younger people he engaged with to avoid illegal activities. He stated,

Like I sit down and talk to a lot of people, like a lot of my little cousins, and let them know like running the streets ain't gonna get you nowhere. It's gonna get you killed, or it's gonna get you locked up.

Kwame's statement declared with certainty that it would be an unalterable mistake if his younger cousins were to engage in these activities. This pattern was shared across participants' stories. Participants' experience with the justice system through incarceration taught them that any connection to illegal activities was an extreme risk. Thus, for many of these young men, a break from the past and, more specifically, their peers was essential to their transition into successful adulthood.

### ***Disconnecting from Negative Influences***

As these young men made a break from the past, there are often two pieces of their past they may felt they needed to leave behind – the environment and their peers. Growing up, many of these young men lived in neighborhoods and communities where gang violence and selling

drugs was pervasive. Even if they could stay disconnected from their activities, the environments themselves could be significantly chaotic. This kind of chaotic environment may have felt limiting and perhaps frightening.

### **Negative Environments**

Steffan was a young man who was able to move out of the environment where he had grown up. He stated, "Where I was before was there was a lot of mayhem; it wasn't directly coming at me, but the environment was way too much mayhem, so I could get caught in anything." Steffan mapped out an environment that, regardless of intent, could still put him in the crosshairs. This sentiment was directly mirrored in Kwame's experience with moving to a new environment. Kwame described, "Like it's different from the environment I grew up in. Going out there, it's real quiet. Like you don't hear gunshots, you don't hear a lot of police, you don't hear about people getting killed." For Steffan and Kwame, being able to make a break from this environment reduced their risk for injury, potential issues with the justice system, and perhaps more peace of mind. These things may have been necessary as they tried to make the changes they wanted as they moved into adulthood.

Moving from an old environment as part of the break from their past could have been a change that supported their experiences during emergent adulthood. These moves may have required financial and housing resources that other young men may not had. Still, if these young men could have changed neighborhoods, it may not have signaled a complete shift in who their friend groups were. Consequently, many of these young men remained in contact with friends and peers with whom they grew up. However, many of these friends and peers were often still engaged in activities and behaviors that opposed the behavioral and character changes participants felt they had to make. One of the primary pieces of the past that these young men

felt they needed to leave behind and disconnect from was their relationship with their friends and peers.

### *Negative Peer Influences*

This relationship with friends and peers was sometimes considered a bad influence on these young men. In the interviews, they described these relationships with peers and friends as under the umbrella of "the streets." Andrew describes the broader umbrella term and his desire to stay disconnected when he said, "I refuse to do that, let the streets get to me. I want to be better than that." Andrew's comment expressed his desire to change and transition into adulthood. He indicated that to make this change, he needed to disconnect from the streets.

Fry further expanded and clarified this idea about the negative influence of the streets when he explained, "I don't hang out on the streets no more because you hang around negative people, you do negative things, and negative things happen." Fry's explanation provided more context and connections about what Andrew described. From Fry's words, it seemed that when these young men hang out "on the streets," this is where they might feel exposed to more negative influences in their lives, specifically through their peers or friends. Similar to how their environments have been outlined, by hanging around negative people, there may be a concern that they could jeopardize their futures.

Despite Kwame and Steffan's best efforts, they put their futures at risk by moving away from a bad environment. Both still have to navigate contact with bad influences through peer and friendship relationships. Kwame described the lengths he felt he had to go to disconnect from friends and peers. Kwame stated, "I've been on a path. I don't hang around people that are negative, I don't do things that are negative. Everything I do is positive cause I got people that look up to me." Kwame may have suggested that he put up a reasonably strong boundary around

his peer relationships. Anything negative or a relationship that may put him in a potentially risky circumstances was not tolerated.

In this way, disconnecting from his peers protected the changes he attempting to make. Steffan shared an idea that seemingly took Kwame's statement to the next level. Steffan explained, "I try not to act better, but I act like I'm trying to show you what different looks like. What absolutely positive looks like, with not being into dumb stuff, like gangs and just what no-nonsense looks like." Steffan maintained a similar boundary between negative influences and people, in that he doesn't engage with them. Steffan also seemed intent on putting positive influences back into his environment; through his example, he could show others a better way.

Steffan and Kwame's process of making a rigid boundary around their relationships with their peers and friends may have been easier because of their living situation. However, young men like Old Cat may needed to navigate this break from the past more subtly. When asked about his peer relationships now, Old Cat described a somewhat complex navigation around activities he used to do with friends and how he manages that currently. Old Cat stated,

Yo, you don't know man you walking in a, you on enemy lines. You walking in a field of nothing but stashed mines. You make that wrong move; you just gonna set it off. (So you're not trying to do that) Nah, that's why I don't even really do clubs, for real. Next time I go to a club, it's gonna be because it's a family night out or I'm with my favorite cousin, and I feel comfortable.

Old Cat's words about being on enemy lines suggested that his relationships with peers make going out and having a good time feel like a potential battlefield. If he were in the wrong place, he may once again be placed around peers who could get him into trouble. Instead of going out

to clubs, he avoided the situation altogether. However, perhaps going with family may have helped him navigate any potential issues with his peers.

Old Cat seemed to want to rely on others to help him keep bad influences out of his life. In Fry's case, his probation office helped him set up those boundaries. Fry explained a conversation with his probation officer that was a meaningful description of disconnecting from bad influences. Fry stated,

My probation officer noticing that I know people and stuff like that, he didn't want me in an environment where he know that I know people. So, he like, "we not gonna have you in this environment because you know a lot of people and when you around a lot of people, you bound to get in trouble."

Fry's probation office noticed that for Fry, the most impactful part of Fry's environment was the people in it. Fry may have felt easily influenced by the actions of others, and therefore, being around them was becoming a barrier to the changes he wanted to make to transition successfully into adulthood. This distinction between the power of environment and friends may indicate that a disconnection from friends is a more crucial step in these young men's break from the past.

### ***Lack of Trust in Peers***

For some young men, this break from their peer relationships may be simple because of a lack of trust in others. Similarly to the process of disconnection from family, for some young men, at the root of disconnection from friends, there was a lack of trust in peer relationships. A lack of trust is likely because of the exposure to violence through gangs and hustling. This uncertainty around peer relationships and the vigilance required in the relationship was summed up well by Isaiah, who explained how he moved through his peer relationships, "One minute they can be happy, smiling, saying good stuff about you, but at the same time, you aint going to

want to go for 'cause they probably talking about you right behind your back once you first met them." In Isaiah's experience, it seemed he felt that he could not entirely trust his relationship with his friends. In his mind friends may have been harboring secret resentment or at least gossip that they would have acted on if the relationship were to turn poorly. An inability to relax within a relationship because of fear of harm may have made disconnecting from friends and peers remarkably easier.

Some young men may have lacked trust in the world and took an almost pre-emptive approach to poor relationships with peers or friends. By cutting off all connections with friends and peers, they could avoid harm and distractions to their progress. Empire exemplified this idea when he described his mindset at the Baltimore U.P. center. He stated, "But at the same time, I will fuck you over as anyone else. Just like anybody else out there. So, that's all I do. I come here, and I do my work." Empire was under the impression that the other young men who attended the center the way he did could not be trusted for similar reasons. He needed to keep his head down and do his work; if someone were to have messed with him, he would have pushed back against them.

Empire's approach toward other young men who may share in a similar life transition highlighted an essential aspect of masculinity. As stated previously, participants identified that part of transitioning into adulthood and becoming a man was that this process needed to be accomplished independently. Even though many of these young men at these centers are trying to accomplish similar things – change their behavior, adjust their character, and break from their past – Empire's statement seemed to suggest that they may not even feel safe relying on each other. Regardless of whether or not they may have good influences in their lives around them,

because of the rules of hegemonic masculinity and a feeling that they cannot trust their peers, these men remained isolated on their road to change.

For some young men, remaining isolated proved to help them keep focus on the changes they were trying to create in their lives. When talking about the way he had disconnected from his peers and friends, Old Cat stated,

“fuck the world” focus on me, for real. So like, if I get into a fight or something, I don’t care about the consequences or nothing, only thing in my mind is to just make sure I’m safe and good by any means.

Old Cat's statement took on a broader approach to his relationship with his peers and friends that was undiscerning. By having the mindset of "fuck the world," Old Cat had essentially written off anyone that may have caused him harm or make a mistake that could hurt him. He also expressed in this statement what may be an automatic reaction to a perceived threat or danger. Through Old Cat's experiences, there may have been so much hurt that he would go to whatever lengths he needed to protect himself.

This self-protection mindset has provided meaningful benefits for Young One, including seeing new progress or opportunities. When Young One discussed the effects of disconnecting from his friends and peers, he stated,

Many things started opening up for me for real, and that's why I love it for real. I didn't go out and do the same thing for real. (yeah, so by saying fuck the world and cutting yourself off, you were able to concentrate on things that were important to you.) Right.

Disconnecting from friends and peers by having the mindset of "fuck the world" may have allowed Young One to disconnect from negative influences. By disconnecting from these influences, he may have found it easier to make the changes he wanted and then started seeing

progress in his transition into adulthood. Young One's description of his break from the past exemplified that there may be some power and benefit to disconnection from friends and peers.

### ***Extreme Break from the Past***

Sometimes, a disconnection from peers and friends may have needed to be taken to extreme measures in order to experience a complete break from the past. When describing his break from the past, Matt explained the way that he allowed people in his life to think that he was dead. He shared,

Yeah, cause everybody from my past thinks I'm dead, pretty much. Like you heard it around there [YO Center] in the lobby, like my man was like, "I was trying to tell you, but I ain't want to say-I didn't know if it were true or not-" he was like, "Yeah a nigga was tellin me you got shot on Lombard" and I was like, "Yeah, they told you I was dead, right? Niggas thought I was dead." He was like, "Yeah.." Yo, you heard them. Niggas think I'm dead right now, so I don't worry about nothing. My past is my old past. I'm living a new life. I was born not too long ago.

Matt shared his experience a form of rebirth. By allowing others to think that he was dead, he was able to completely restart his new life. This example may have demonstrated just how dramatic this break from the past may have needed to be for some young men. By disconnecting from their friends and peers, they tuned out potential distractions, protected themselves from harm, reduced risk to their future, and achieved the masculine goal of successful adulthood through independent means.

Despite what these stories may indicate – that many men may felt it was easier to completely disconnect from their friends and peers, it may have been more complicated than that. These friendships and peer relationships were often made during childhood in high-stress

situations. These young men often went out into "the streets" to make money, cope with a lack of resources, cope with abuse, and cope with extreme violence. The friendships made in these circumstances were significant to these young men; therefore, disconnecting from these relationships was an extremely complicated or even grief-filled process. This idea was captured well by Fry, who described this tension and nuance of disconnecting from friends and peers. He stated that these friends were,

Just like family. To this day, I still cool with them, they still my friends, I just don't, a lot of things people do, I just don't place myself around. But they still my friends, I love them to death. Love 'em. All I can say is that I love them. I love them like brothers.

That's what we are, brothers. We are brothers, just from a different mother.

In a break from the past, Fry had to stop hanging out with their friends and peers with whom he shared a deep love. By not hanging around them anymore, he may have been able to protect his future, reduce exposure to violence, and reduce exposure to negative influence. However, in his statement, there were still bittersweet feelings of missing his friends and the family he created as a child.

These breaks from the past served as an effective strategy for tuning out perceived peer distractions and negative influences as these young men try to change their behaviors. The implied hope was that by disconnecting from their friends, they would be able to avoid past behavioral patterns that jeopardized their future.

Distancing and disconnection as a masculine strategy for managing complex relationships with family and friends assisted these young men as they transitioned into independent adulthood. Unfortunately, these young men may have isolated themselves because of this strategy of distancing and disconnection from family and friends. This isolation from family and

friends may have created a sense of elevated self-sufficiency that placed increased pressure on emergent adulthood.

### **Self Sufficiency**

As these emergent adults, with their unwavering determination, disconnected from family and peers to navigate the complex relational binds, they discovered an increased sense of personal responsibility. The healing and growth they sought were placed entirely on their shoulders. These individuals defined a successful transition into adulthood by their ability to be self-sufficient. They equated adulthood with manhood, measuring it by their capacity to live an independent adult life through self-sufficient means. Their narratives on a successful transition to adulthood delved into two facets of masculine self-sufficiency: Independence and not depending on others.

### ***Independence***

An internal locus of control marked independence. Participants hoped that one day they could stand on their own, in their own space, through their efforts. Their stories suggested an isolated future, whose success depended entirely on themselves. When DeOntte was asked to expand on his future goals, he stated, "To become an adult is like the next step in life: being on your own." DeOntte is very connected to his siblings and has provided finances for them since he was young. DeOntte's words explained that he expected himself to move out and start to be on his own. Living independently was the next expected step in the transition to adulthood. Tyler shared this idea with DeOntte when he explained what a successful transition to adulthood meant: "Getting on your own and having your own house is what an adult means to me."

Mirrored in both statements was a sense of independent or isolated living. Successful adulthood

was about getting to the point where these young men could afford their places to live and be in charge of their domain.

Empire expanded on this idea of independent living as a marker of successful adulthood, “an adult is, I would say when you’re making your own rules... you still follow the rules for certain things you can’t do but...but when you make your own rules in your own domain.”

Empire explained the importance of being in charge and regulating his life in the way he wanted.

Empire has been in charge of his life for a very long time through his role as a provider.

Something about becoming an adult marked an increased expectation for self-regulation or self-sufficiency that went beyond the self-regulation he was required to do as a young child. Fry amplified Empire's expectation for increased self-regulation. When describing the mindset change that he went through when he decided to make his break from the past, Fry stated,

I start realizing that I [have] to start making my own decisions; I can’t let nobody else decide my fate. So, this is what I’m gonna do. I’m gonna go out here, I’m gonna apply myself to the school, I’m gonna get me a job. I’m gonna help myself.

Fry and Empire provided for themselves and their families as children. Fry made many decisions, applied himself, and worked through hustling. Still, his version of adulthood included increased self-sufficiency and independent motivation.

For some participants, motivation from internal sources was the only motivation they felt they could rely on. Several participants struggled to trust people because of their stressful relationships as children. Matt explained this feeling when he discussed motivating himself to continue changing and growing: "I ain’t got no hope. Hopes don’t get you nowhere. Hopes and dreams don’t get you nowhere. (What does?) Whatever you do to get you somewhere. (So what motivates you?) Myself. (Who inspires you?) Myself.” Matt’s words reflected the idea that it was

all on Matt to be able to make these changes. Matt had disconnected from hopes or dreams that drew him down the road of healing. Instead, he chose to place his control internally. Through this method, others could not disappoint him and affect his growth. It also increased the pressure that was put on Matt to succeed. If Matt had failed it would have all been on him, and if he had succeeded he would have become a true man.

### ***Don't Depend on Others***

Matt's statement also touched on the second dimension of masculine self-sufficiency: not depending on others for help. Many of them had complex relationships with friends and family. They were also frequently unsure of the available resources their families could provide them. Finally, many men in this sample served their families in adult roles. Thus, they did not learn how to depend on their families for much. Therefore, depending on others may have been a luxury or even a risk, especially concerning their transition into adulthood. On top of these complicated dynamics, transitioning into adulthood was interwoven with becoming a man. Not needing to depend on others was another way they could define themselves as successful men and adults.

For a young man like Emani, who had the educational background needed to go to college, not depending on others was about not having the needed resources. While he had the grades and skills needed to attend university, he did not have the financial backing from his family. "I know when I go to college, no one's supporting me. No one's helping me, so it's gonna be all on me. Since no one is gonna help me, I have to help myself." Emani could not depend on his family to be able to help him with college. Emani chose not to rely on others because of a lack of resources. This put immense pressure on Emani to quickly build up his finances to attend college.

Andrew remarked on a similar experience around money. Andrew was asked about how he decided to change his life and become more self-sufficient, "I think when I started working because I know I just can't depend on everyone else to give me money. So I started doing things on my own." Andrew felt that there wasn't anyone in his life who would come and rescue him from his financial burdens. He did not have anyone that he could depend on. Thus, he decided to charge ahead without expecting help from others. This may have proven an effective strategy for navigating the transition to adulthood. By being self-sufficient, Andrew did not need to move through complicated relationship dynamics to request help. By relying on himself, he avoided potential distractions to his progress.

Andrew found a sense of personal motivation by letting go of the need to depend on others. Emani realized that he could not depend on his family because they did not have the resources to support him. Empire described depending on others as a type of failure. "I don't like depending on anybody. That's one thing I had to learn to get out of depending on somebody. Cause you depending on somebody that means you're not standing on your own two feet." Empire stated that this was something that he had to learn. In becoming an adult and a man, he had to let go of the idea of depending on others because the notion of "standing on your own two feet" was more crucial to the changes he was trying to make within himself. Self-sufficiency was vital to these emergent adults because it meant they had successfully transitioned into manhood.

### **Conclusion**

When participants explained what successful adulthood meant to them, nearly every single young man stated that it meant he had a job that allowed him to provide a safe home for his family where he could love and protect them. They longed for stability and community. In many ways, these are the same things that they were striving for as child providers in their

homes. They worked hard to create a family environment where they could feel stable and supported, but they often did not reach their goals.

By disconnecting from friends and family, young men tuned out potential distractions or barriers and put themselves in a situation where they could only achieve manhood through self-sufficient means. They considered themselves successful adults because they were able to arrive at their destinations without the help of others. However, many found that change took time to accomplish on their own, that they frequently did not have the resources needed to accomplish this task, and experienced loneliness. In their efforts to achieve adulthood by self-sufficient means, many were isolated from others and struggled to progress towards healing. These stories may support stereotypes and ideas about emergent adult men of color and the ways that they typically operate in relationships. However, the lives of these young men also demonstrated sincere efforts to seek out help, lean on relationships, and be in meaningful connection with friends and family. These patterns indicated a human capacity for connection that expanded the narratives surrounding these participants.

## **Findings Chapter 5: Help-Seeking Behaviors and Meaningful Connection**

### **Introduction**

In displaying behaviors consistent with traditional masculinity, the participants created a certain distance with a primary focus on independent self-sufficiency. However, they also reached out for assistance and formed connections with others. Despite societal expectations, their willingness to confide in friends and seek support from family underscores the importance of social bonds. These actions, in their active role in combating isolation, not only reveal a desire but also emphasize the crucial role of relationships in the lives of these young adults.

Participants sought various forms of assistance, including practical, emotional, and mental support from others. The level of trust and reliance on different individuals varied among these men. Most participants looked to maternal figures in their lives, such as their mother, aunt, or grandmother, as their primary sources of support. Additionally, fathers, brothers, peers, and connections within a gang were essential sources of help for these individuals.

Amidst the conflicting pressures of transitioning into independent adulthood while still fulfilling familial responsibilities, young adults often resorted to distancing mechanisms to navigate this complex phase. However, there were moments when they purposefully chose to cultivate meaningful connections and seek support. These proactive behaviors have proven to be beneficial for their healing journey from childhood trauma and stress.

One of the strongest examples of help-seeking behaviors is Tyler. Tyler shared many stories and feelings of dependence on his family. Perhaps the most important person in Tyler's life was his sister's boyfriend. Tyler genuinely looked up to this man as a role model of positive manhood and successful adulthood. Tyler struggled with several parts of school because of how much moving he did as a child, and he explained that his reading scores were going up, which

was a big accomplishment. “(It seemed like you felt proud about that.) Yeah (yeah. It’s a cool accomplishment to have.) My sister’s boyfriend helped me out a lot. I look up to him cause he helped me out a lot.” Tyler’s ability to seek out the help of his sister’s boyfriend and accept the help allowed him to navigate a school challenge that has plagued Tyler to get his GED. Tyler’s already meaningful relationship with his sister’s boyfriend was a large part of the reason that Tyler was so willing to seek the support he needed to get his GED.

As Tyler described, his sister and sister's boyfriend made a concerted effort to have a relationship with Tyler. Andrew made a similar effort in \ his relationship with his sisters. Andrew was placed in the foster system and separated from his siblings at a young age. He tried to keep in touch with them and would sometimes placed in similar group homes. He expressed that his sisters were two of the most influential people in his life.

So we’re real close, we’re real, real close. (How did you guys get so close?) I don’t know...cause we always with each other. Shae always looked out for me, and Keyanna always looked out for me. So...by the time I got older, I started doing my own thing. Andrew’s words express a healthy balance of connection and independence. His two sisters looked after him and ensured he had the support he needed. Once he got a bit older, Andrew felt ready to start developing his sense of independence. Andrew's connection with his sisters was not a distraction or an obstacle but something that may have made him feel more confident.

Participants found a way to strike a healthy balance of meaningful connection and independence in various ways. DeOntte was invited to explain how it felt as his family removed support as he was growing up,

I mean...my family has always given us room to grow, but if there's any point that we need help, they'll help; they've always given to us. It's basically like you survive on your

own at any age, but when you need that support, or you're struggling, we got you. So it's basically like a net (safety net) safety net.

As a child, DeOntte worked as a musician in his church to provide for his family, and his mother had to work strange hours to keep a roof over their heads. Despite the stress of being a provider for his family, DeOntte maintained a sense that his family would always be around to help him. DeOntte's faith in his family as a safety net allowed him to lean on his family meaningfully, enabling him to navigate emergent adulthood.

Still, other families considered age an essential factor in how much help they would provide. Empire was a participant who often described moments of disconnection with friends and family. Despite his disconnection actions, the knowledge that he has support is still present. When asked whether he could lean on his family when he needed support, Empire explained, "That's what's being grown in my family. If you need help, they'll help you. Other than that, you're grown enough to make your decisions about whether you want to do it or not." Empire knew that if he needed help, his family would provide it. He also understood that he was expected to navigate his needs because he was a certain age. Empire also believed this defined family support: the expectation is independence first and support second.

Each participant explained slightly different expectations of the help level available to them. Some families seemed to operate more like DeOntte's or Scuba's family, with a strong sense of closeness forged through many challenges the family overcame. These young showed evidence of help-seeking behavior as they navigated the relational difficulties of emergent adulthood. Alternatively, young men like Empire and Matt explained family systems where less help might have been offered, and thus, more self-sufficiency was expected of them. Across both

family types, emergent men demonstrated the impulse to connect with others and heal through their relationships.

### **Important Relationships: Mothers & Aunts**

Most participants had a solid and meaningful relationship with their mothers. Mothers are revered for their lifelong consistency, making them one of the most secure relationships. Some individuals may even have experienced abuse, neglect, or pain in their relationships with their parents during childhood. Still, they were often more inclined to forgive their mothers than their fathers. The inability to overlook their fathers' actions may have been a form of masculine policing that motivated the participants to strive for better. Despite painful connections, mothers were frequently respected and relied upon for almost every kind of support. Mothers may have served a crucial role as these young men learned how to reach out for support during their transition to adulthood.

This consistent and secure figure is best described by Isaiah, who, throughout his interview, expressed his pride and love for his mother. Their relationship had several difficult moments, and still, Isaiah stated that his relationship with his mother was the thing he was the proudest of,

I'm going to have to say my mother because my mother has gone through her ups and downs, been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and ended up spending a couple of years behind bars, but she still managed to come home and get her life back on track.

That's what I'm proud of.

Isaiah's pride in his mother's journey suggests a deep connection and trust. Isaiah's experience as a provider in his home likely deepened his sense of protection for his mother. Many participants who grew up as providers considered their relationship with their mother the most

important. Participants' relationships with their mothers were significant to their sense of self and their feelings of being able to depend on others.

Mano explained a similar connection to his mother when he was asked to share who the most important adult in his life was during his emergent adulthood. "For me, it's always gonna be my mom. She has done everything for me. That's probably one of the motivations for me to keep going through school and try to do my best and get the best grades and stuff." Mano's mother immigrated herself and Mano to the US so that he could have more excellent educational opportunities. Therefore, Mano wanted to accomplish his goals so he could one day give back to her financially. Most participants shared Mano's description of his mother. For them, their mothers had sacrificed so much to give them a roof over their heads; they were usually the most dependable adults in their lives, even if they could not provide clothes or food. Thus, their relationship with their mothers is one of the first relationships they sought out when they needed help.

Aunts also played an essential maternal role for many young men. They often provided the same support and benefits as mothers. Typically, aunts were mentioned in the narrative when the prominent maternal figure was absent from the young men's lives. However, in some cases, aunts were included in addition to the primary maternal figure due to the interconnectedness of the family. Fernando shared this kind of relationship with his aunt. Fernando's family represented a case where the family was strongly interconnected, and his aunt served an essential role in his life because of the size of his family. Fernando was invited to share a person whom he felt like he had a profound and sharing relationship with,

Oh, my aunt, I'm like, 'Hey ma,' she's like, 'I'm like sorry?' (laughs) She's my aunt Lisa everybody [but] calls her mom. (what is so special about ma?) Well, cause I don't know,

cause she's like, 'come over to my house. I want to make you some food. I'm like, 'All right.' I mean, she takes care of us. She got like 12 kids, though

Fernando came from a family where his mother, father, and several siblings were present. With all that support and connection, his aunt was deemed a person who had a profound and sharing relationship with him because she showed her desire to connect with Fernando.

A demonstrated desire to help and support Fernando was complemented by a statement made by DJ. He expressed during his interview that he wanted to help his aunt. When asked to explain this relationship further, DJ stated,

Just like my aunt says, our favorite saying, we don't have to do nothing but stay black and die, but it's a choice. It's the principles. I mean, you treat others like you want to be treated. That's the way I see it, and by my aunt showing me that she wants to help me, I want to help her,

DJ lost both of his parents at a very young age and wasn't able to reconnect with his family till much later in life. His aunt became a more critical adult as he got older. The way that she showed her desire to help DJ was a way that his aunt lowered DJ's defenses. Aunts and mothers played a crucial role in helping young adults become more comfortable asking for help by consistently showing their willingness to be in a relationship with them.

### **Important Relationships: Family and Peers**

Participants often expressed that a single family member was their most important source of support. When describing their families, most portrayed their families as a source of support in general terms. They did not mention one family member as more helpful than the others. In their accounts, families were depicted as a network that these individuals relied on in a variety of minor ways rather than asking a lot from one individual. DeOntte was asked to share people who

he would consider as people who helped him stay motivated and continue moving forward as he made his break from the past, "besides my two cousins....just my sisters and my mom....just the people I interact with...like my aunts and uncles will talk to me every once in a while and tell me to stay on the straight and narrow." DeOntte explained his network of people there to support him, but he doesn't seem to feel that it is that many people. Perhaps DeOntte may have thought he had a support network, but because it is broad, it doesn't feel as deep and reliable as he might have needed.

When other participants explained a more comprehensive support network than a specific family member, this feeling was present in their words. A broader support network may have allowed these young men to bounce around to different parts of the network without getting too deep with just one person. DeOntte also had a very close relationship with his mother and may have felt he could rely primarily on her rather than needing a broader network.

A broader network allows for specific amounts of freedom and may be used as a new social environment that empowers the changes they are trying to make. Kwame explained the motivating forces in his life during emergent adulthood,

The motivating and driving forces in my life is my daughter and just family. Lots of people and just people that support me a lot. Really keeping you positive. Keeping you focused on track. People that's not gonna put you down. People that's always gonna "good job." Even if it's just a little thing. Just "good job. I'm proud of you."

In this way, the peer networks that Kwame disconnected from as he transitioned into adulthood were replaced by more positive networks like his family. While participants worked to disconnect from their families, they may still have chosen to be connected to them to have a more supportive and positive social environment.

Disconnection from peers often served an essential function in assisting participants as they broke from the past. Still, some peer relationships were significant and supportive for other participants during this time. Peers rarely provided physical or practical support as they often needed similar support. Thus, emotional support was the most frequent type of exchange. This kind of emotional support frequently went both ways, allowing these young men to receive and practice giving support to others. Sometimes, peer relationships were considered more straightforward, and thus, it was easier for them to share their internal dialogues than it would have been with family or parents. For Esteban, this peer was his friend, Laura, "She's like a true friend, like a family- someone that will stick with you through sticks or stones or something like that." Laura was someone that Esteban had known since he was a little kid and was someone that he leaned on when he felt that he was unable to talk to his parents.

Similarly to Esteban, Scuba was asked who he was closest to, "Well, I'd probably say Angel. I knew him the longest. Me and him met in 1st grade. (Wow.) And we just, you know, stayed friends. Me and him, we going to go to the Art Institute." In both Esteban and Scuba's experiences with friendship, the length of time and trust that was built was an essential part of helping them feel like they could turn to and rely on Laura and Angel. Friends that participants felt genuinely close to were frequently mentioned by name, indicating that for some participants, these types of relationships may be rare.

Young men often turned to their mothers, aunts, family, and friends during emergent adulthood for help and support. These relationships provided a valuable sense of safety and connection. Trust and reliance were crucial elements that contributed to the young men's feeling safe and comfortable within these relationships.

### **The Needs of Emergent Adults**

In leaning on these critical relationships, participants expressed various needs and supports they were willing to ask for. These needs encompassed practical supports such as housing, finances, and activities, as well as emotional and social needs such as sharing emotions and finding motivation to continue healing. Since many of these young men have taken significant breaks from the past, including the activities they would rely on to keep them busy, participants relied on family and certain friends to fill their day with things to do. They spent their time with people in their houses, playing sports, or engaged in other activities with their families. Scuba's family gathers on the weekends to watch movies, which is their favorite activity.

Yeah, we tend to watch a movie. (What kind of movies do you like to watch? ) We watch every kind of movie. It could be drama, comedy, to action. Any kind. Anything. We have so many movies. Like so many movies.

Participants were no longer going out to clubs, hustling, or being in hostile environments. A movie night with family was the best way to spend their time and served as a positive environment that supported the changes these participants were trying to make.

Kwame also enjoyed watching movies with his family. He explained that his family became his central social system, given that he doesn't currently have a job, and much of his activity came from when his mother and siblings were around the house.

My mother and my sisters like that's an everyday thing that we spend time together, though. Like my mother, before she go to work, like we probably go out, like when I stay there, we probably go out and get breakfast or something. Or we just wait till the nighttime. We go to the movies, or we'll just take little trips like Kings Dominion and stuff like that just to have all of us together.

Kwame relied on his family as his source of daily activity and perhaps even accountability. Ensuring his family was present for these activities directed his social energy towards more favorable environments, increasing his trust in others and his sense of safety.

Other participants may have chosen less physical contact with their families because of complicated dynamics. However, phone contact was used frequently to stay in touch with family members without being in their homes. When Fry was interviewed about his day-to-day activities, he explained, "My oldest brothers and sisters, we communicate a lot over the phone. Well, over the computer, I talk to my family every day. But not like that. When I'm on the phone, I usually talk to my girlfriend." Fry kept in touch with his family and girlfriend through the computer and the phone; this activity filled his day. By staying in communication with them through the telephone, Fry was able to tune out potential distractions or negative influences in his day. In this way, he used relationships to help him rather than disconnecting from them.

### ***Practical Supports***

The most standard way that these young men relied on their families was for more practical support, such as housing and finances. Regardless of a desire to live independently, many participants' practical needs were too urgent to be managed independently, especially given that many young men did not have the resources they needed when they began transitioning into adulthood. Most participants had a complicated relationship with finances because they hustled as children to provide for their families. Their ability to be providers as emergent adults was closely tied to their financial resources. Asking for cash could be a complicated experience. When the participants discussed who they could turn to if they needed financial support, most were very quick to share specific persons from their lives that they could ask for cash.

Tyler's relationship with his sister's boyfriend was highly connected and safe for Tyler. When Tyler was questioned about who he could turn to if he needed cash, he was quick to state, My sister's boyfriend (Is he working?) He used to work, but he's about to start working again. My sister works. She works. I can go to her for some money. I could go to my mother for some money. My mother, yeah, she'll give me some money.

Tyler listed three people from whom he would feel comfortable asking for money. The list included his sister's boyfriend, who was not working at the time, his sister, and his mother. These three people were people that Tyler felt comfortable enough asking for cash. Tyler also mentioned these three individuals as people that he had a safe and dependable relationship with.

Another practical support that participants relied on others for was housing. Every participant lived with a family member or trusted guardian. Affording their apartment or house was extremely important for all participants and marked successful adulthood. However, they did not possess the financial resources needed to pay rent or buy a home. Therefore, they had to live with another person. As an act of help-seeking behavior, getting support for their housing needs was something that these young men explained with a degree of resistance. Despite it being the most common support, these young men received, it was not the type of help they expressed the most gratitude. Matt described various people with whom he lived to manage his housing concerns.

So, who do you live with?) My mother. (And how long have you lived with her?) I've lived with her all my life. (Are there any other places that you stay?) I might stay with my girlfriend at my aunt's house. My girlfriend stays with my aunt, and I'm paying her rent. But I really live with my mother, but I stay with my girl, but I live with my mother.

Matt shared that he would move between his girlfriend's house, his aunt's house, and his mother's house. He relied on other people to allow him to stay in their houses, which is why he accepted and received help through his relationships. However, this was often a source of shame or instability because he was expected to have his own independent space as an emergent adult.

The final type of practical support explored through the interviews was if the participants were ever sick and needed care, which might be classified as caretaking. Given the lack of resources, most young men needed access to medical care or insurance. Therefore, participants anxiously avoided getting sick. These young men could not turn to medical care and thus had to rely on a person within their network to assist them in a time of need. When asked who he would turn to, "If I got sick? My mother, she's been taking care of me ever since I was little, like every time I get sick or have an asthma attack or something, she is right there with my inhaler or my equalizer." Like Snoop, most participants almost instantly mentioned their mother, aunt, or grandmother. These women often performed other general caretaking roles in the lives of these young men. They were often the people they seemed to feel most comfortable being vulnerable around.

### ***Emotional and Mental Supports***

In terms of more emotional or mental supports that participants leaned on relationships for, several young men considered a maternal figure or their child as a source of internal motivation. A few participants had children in their late adolescence or early young adulthood. For these young men, part of being a good man meant being a good father that their son or daughter could be proud of. This desire was also connected to how their parents raised them and wanted to be different. A generative sense usually sparked a desire to change, which made their motivation for healing become about how they would be able to show up for their children. Fry

had a son when he was in late adolescence and worried that if he weren't present in his life, he would miss essential moments with his son.

When my son was born, I kind of figured I didn't want my son calling no other man Daddy, so I really wanted to be there, apply myself to him, and be in his life. So, I realized that I needed to change.

Fry's words highlight a level of masculine generativity around fatherhood and bloodline. While masculinity often led participants to disconnect from relationships, in this instance, masculinity is part of the reason that Fry was motivated to be in his child's life.

Young One shared this desire to be present in his daughter's life. Additionally, his mother inspired him to change. He stated, "I see my mother; she's a big influence on me. That's the only influence I got, and my daughter and I don't want my daughter growing up the way I grew up." Wanting to ensure that he can provide a different life for his daughter as she grew up motivated Young One to change his character. Both Young One and Fry demonstrated that they were relationally motivated. Participants' relationships with the people they loved and trusted were spaces where they made a concerted effort to connect. By leaning on these relationships, young men could stay focused on the changes they were trying to make.

One of the most vital steps in the healing journey for these young men was having relationships where they felt safe enough to share their emotional experiences as they transitioned into adulthood. This was an essential part of the change process for many young men as they moved toward successful adulthood. These sharing emotional experiences were usually very vulnerable. Most often, they leaned towards disconnection to manage their transition to adulthood. When they could lean into a relationship for emotional processing, there was rarely more than one person they felt they could trust. When asked who he went to for

emotional support, Fry stated, “Umm, my mother, that’s about it.” The people that participants leaned on were usually confidants for all parts of their lives.

Since there was only about one person that these emerging adults would turn to for emotional support, participants would often tell them everything. Andrew explained that the person he turned to the most was his grandmother. “(So you mentioned your granny and that you have a sharing relationship with her-) Yeah, we’re cool. We talk and stuff like that...like about what’s going on in my life, how I am doing, and all that.” Andrew seems safe enough with his grandmother to explain to her how he is making the transition to adulthood: his day-to-day life, his successes, his failures, and the people who matter to him. Esteban shared a mirrored relationship with his best friend Laura, “It’s like, like me and her, we tell each other everything, like left to right stuff, up and down. Yeah, I tell her everything.” This kind of open and sharing relationship is seldom mentioned in any other aspect of Esteban, Andrew, or other participants’ lives, except with the person they trust. These relationships and their safety became vital for these young men to protect, stating that their greatest fear would be losing them.

Old Cat explained why these unique relationships felt so trusting and safe. Old Cat’s deep sharing relationship was with his cousin, “I feel like I can go and tell him anything, and I don’t have to worry about it being passed around, for real.” What was so impactful for Old Cat about his relationship with his cousin was that he felt what he shared would be protected. Many of these young men were closed off and disconnected from others. The secrets and feelings that they had were rarely shared with others. Therefore, sharing these feelings with others may have become a sacred space. Violation of that trust in any way likely would have caused deep hurt and trauma for these young men.

### **Social Skills**

The participants' desire to have meaningful relationships as they transition into adulthood is evident in their stories of seeking help. Their ability to connect in relationships is apparent in their social skills. The participants mainly developed the skill of observation. Their experiences of hustling, being leaders in their homes, and growing vigilance due to exposure to violence taught them the power of observation.

### ***Observation***

Young men shared that they found these observational abilities helpful in various social situations, including job environments and helping others.

Empire explained during his interview that one benefit of his vigilance is his ability to read a situation and predict how it may unfold.

I'm a good observer. I actually looked up why I'm a good observer from my symbol, but most Libras are good observers. I can see 18 different ways a situation happened while you're only thinking of 2. And I can actually tell you what's gonna happen, how it's gonna happen, what's she's gonna say, all the possibilities, etc.

Empire's capacity for observing gave him insight into relationships and social situations that others may not have possessed. He may have been able to use this skill to help him navigate complex situations, adjust his demeanor to fit the circumstance or be able to manage a room full of employees. Empire's words also suggest that he thought about relationships meaningfully and may be more sensitive to shifts. This sensitivity to relationships because of high observational skills may be one of the reasons Empire disconnected himself from friends and family.

Fry demonstrated how this observational capacity allowed him to learn quickly at a new job. He explained during the interview that he was looking for a job and described some of the

skills he had developed. He noted that he had learned several construction and carpentry skills.

When asked to share how he had gained these skills, he stated,

By myself. I learned it working around people because I worked for a private contractor who owned houses, and basically, what he did was he hired me and taught me. So, as I was working for him, he was teaching me, and I just never forgot what he taught me. I always built on it.

Fry's work became so good that he could be dropped off at a job site without supervision and do the job independently. Fry's observational skills allowed him to learn a job so quickly that he didn't need the support that most beginners may need on a new job. Fry could have applied these observational skills in various other vocational settings that may have helped him begin to create a career.

### ***Listening***

Closely related to the skill of observation was the social skill of listening. Many participants noted their ability to listen to others, allowing them to read others well and quickly absorb information. As these young men grew up providing for their families, many noted how people would come to them and share their problems without prompting. Adults often perceived these young men as more mature and wise because of their home responsibilities. Empire outlined the way that he treated people when they came to him to share their feelings,

It's like when I'm quiet, people tell me mostly everything. Stuff I don't even want to know. That's how I've gotten to know so much cause people will tell me like anything because I just sit down and listen. I'm a good listener. I'll sit down and listen, not give you my opinion, and just let you talk.

Steffan shared the skills of a strong listener and conversationalist. These may be the same qualities that several participants developed and made them sought after by their families and peers. These young men developed these skills throughout their lives. Their listening ability may also have been another reason they chose to disconnect. Through listening, they may have gained access to information and insights that imposed more relational obligations on them.

Disconnecting allowed them to tune out things that they could detract from their independence.

### ***Generativity***

Lastly, as these young men work to change their lives and make a break from negative influences, many participants expressed a generative quality about themselves. They expressed their desire to see family, peers, and other young men make similar positive changes. This suggested a hope to be part of a community with shared values and to see the cycle of trauma that had affected their childhoods broken. Duarte explained the way that he encourages his friends to make a successful transition to adulthood, "My friends sometimes are not independent. and they are not sometimes responsible, sometimes I try to push them, push them to do something, for example, I don't know, homework, and everything they have to do." Duarte made an impact on his friends and his environment by encouraging his peers to make different decisions. His encouragement for his friends to be more earnestly engaged in their schoolwork was a way that Duarte showed his desire for a positive community.

Generativity was especially evident among participants at the D.M. Center. They worked as after-school mentors for other young men struggling in school there. Kendall described the impact he felt he had made working there.

So far, working here, I would say. I feel as though I made a change for a lot of kids. So, I'd probably say I feel really accomplished about that. I know I help a lot of them out.

And I don't want them going down any dumb roads.

Kendall expressed a sense of pride in being able to give back to other young boys like he once had been. His work with the young men demonstrated a desire to connect with people and help others avoid the mistakes he made when he was their age. This action exemplified a level of care about the next generation.

Fry, who attended the U.P. center in Baltimore, displayed similar dreams of generativity. When Fry was asked what he wanted to do for a career, he explained that he wanted to be a social worker. His experience with social workers was mixed. He shared stories of social workers who had significantly impacted his life and social workers that he felt neglected. Fry explained,

I want to be the cool one. The one that a child can relate to. The one that they can say, like, "Oh, alright, Mr. Smith, he cool, I like Mr. Smith, he know how to talk to you, he ain't mean, I mean, he cool, you ask him for this you can get it, like that type.

As Fry processed his experience with social workers, he identified this as area where he could make a difference for others. He felt that because of his experience, he would know what the young people needed. Many of these participants survived unspeakable traumas and horrors. They had a capacity for pain and hurt that most humans may not have had to have. This quality made these young men powerfully suited to give back and support others.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the efforts to disconnect, many participants sought out relationships for support and strength during emergent adulthood. Their words indicated an inherent desire for human

closeness and connection. Moreover, they also demonstrated a unique capacity for relational connection and social sensitivity. These qualities, although hidden and perhaps underutilized, suggested that there is hope for these young men to come out of their isolation.

Participants frequently demonstrated that they were relationally motivated in the ways that they expressed a desire to be good fathers, make impacts on their community, and were motivated by the relationships that were important to them. Relying on this source of motivation and the social skills they demonstrated, the participants may have been able to better navigate their transition to adulthood. They may have felt less lonely, had more resources, and gathered more positive influences. Granted, there were still limitations to this given that many of their supports were also low on resources and were experiencing high levels of stress. Still, meaningful connection with others can be one of the most healing experiences (Real, 1998), which would have been crucial for these emergent adults as they worked towards change.

## Discussion

This study aimed to understand how Black and Latino emergent adult men navigated their relationships - more specifically, Black and Latino young men from low socioeconomic backgrounds who experienced high levels of exposure to stress during childhood. It was proposed that this group of young men was more likely to endorse hegemonic masculinity norms because of their exposure to stress (Courtney, 2011; Bondoc et al., 2022; Seaton, 2007). Hegemonic masculinity norms encourage the management of stress and relationships through disconnection leading to – the loss of the relational (Real, 1998). Thus, as these young men move into emergent adulthood, hegemonic masculinity norms could significantly affect how they manage their relationships with family and friends.

## Main Findings

This study provided critical insights into the factors that influenced how these emergent adults transitioned into adulthood, especially around their relationships. One of the most important factors was the role of the provider that participants took on during childhood as part of the process of adultification. Being a provider was a consistent source of stress that required participants to take on at least part, if not all, of the financial responsibility of their lives and their families. This role often required them to engage in hustling, informal, and usually illegal ways of making money quickly (Scott et al., 2020). Hustling, for most participants, involved selling drugs and being involved with a gang. These associations increased their exposure to stress and violence.

The provider role often became a source of identity and focus for young boys, which took their attention away from school, which meant that many could not complete their high school education. The provider role also came with other responsibilities, including emotional support

to family members, caretaking of young siblings, and functional independence at a young age. This role as a provider shifted how many young men moved through their relationships with family and peers during childhood. Participants felt a high obligation to their families, which became a motivating force during childhood. Their role as providers also meant that they may not have been able to feel safe and supported by their parents, given that they had to provide for their family's financial needs. As participants described their experiences in emergent adulthood, many noted a relational bind that developed in their lives.

As these young men moved into emergent adulthood, most understood that if they were going to be able to have the future that they envisioned, they would need to make meaningful changes to their behavior, character, and environment. Participants identified negative influences from family and friends as part of the obstacles that were holding them back from being able to make these changes. To manage the challenges within their relationship with others, many young men choose to engage in hegemonic masculinity norms and disconnect from these relationships. By disconnecting from these relationships, participants gained needed distance that allowed them to feel like they were progressing on their healing journey.

### ***The Relational Bind***

Unfortunately, many participants were left isolated from the relationships around them in their efforts to gain space from the relational difficulties. They frequently could not describe more than one person they felt they could truly rely on and trust. They described their day-to-day life as mostly solitary and without much activity. Participants explained that in their relationships with family and friends where they were simultaneously in and out of their relationships and worked to grapple with how to navigate these relationships. This identified tension was defined as a relational bind with three dimensions.

**Developmental.** The developmental dimension was the first and most universal aspect of the relational bind. Some participants described this part of the relational bind in navigating differentiation from family. They discussed wanting more independence and less guidance from their parents. They discussed slowly developing more autonomy as part of the normal process of becoming adults. There were moments in their stories where young men felt like their family was striking a good balance and others where the young man felt lost. Research indicated that this process is normative and relatively universal for most emergent adults and their families (Oliveira et al., 2020; Conger & Little, 2010). Most emergent adults work to develop a sense of autonomy while still trying to manage connections with their family members, and the way that they maintain these relationships can have an impact on their psychological well-being (Fosco et al., 2012). For emergent adults with the financial resources needed to launch these transitions in family relationships, it may be easier to manage than it is for young people without those resources. College access may provide housing options and social support as a buffer during those relational shifts. The participants in this study often could not gain that space from family relationships because of a lack of financial resources. Along with this barrier, many participants did not feel they could escape into relationships with peers, given that they perceived their relationships with peers as negative influences.

**Interpersonal.** The second dimension of the relational bind was the interpersonal dimension, or the binds that these young men identified because of their practical needs or their obligations to family members. The participants identified many practical needs they had and struggled to meet because of their poor financial circumstances. These included housing, cash, transportation, and employment support. Many young men relied on family relationships to get these needs met. They indicated that their family members were people that they could go to and

ask for help. Participants often still had complicated relationships with these people and chose to maintain them because they may not have had access to financial help or housing without them. In this way, the relational bind was maintained by their genuine and practical needs.

Given that many participants took on provider roles in their families in childhood. Part of their masculine imperative included being a provider, and young men also felt certain obligations to their family members that maintained the relational bind. They noted the desire to continue to support their family while also finding ways to establish their sense of independence. Their obligation to their family because of old roles and traditional ideas about being a man may have kept them in relationships that were still painful and difficult to manage.

The impact of the provider role was another way that these young men experienced unique pathways through adulthood compared to their more financially resourced peers. These young men had to step into provider roles because of their families' low socioeconomic backgrounds. The expectations of being a provider in childhood carried into emergent adulthood and became a part of the relational bind.

**Intrapersonal.** One of the complicated elements of the relational bind consistent across all dimensions for these participants was that they were still connected with family members and peers that may have hurt them or placed them in situations where they learned that their genuine emotional expression would have been unsafe to share. Thus, a part of the relational bind was that these young men likely needed to share and express their emotional or intrapersonal experiences. However, it was unsafe to do so in their relationships.

This was also further complicated by the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. These young men had been standing in as the man of the house (Roy et al., 2014) and relied on hegemonic masculinity as a road map for navigating their lives. By being emotionally expressive, these

young men may also have felt that they were betraying their masculine identity and were at risk of being perceived as weak (Courtney, 2011). In this way, their masculine imperatives and the relatively risky nature of their relationships may have put them in a type of bind around their intrapersonal experience as emergent adults.

These three dimensions of the relational bind—developmental, interpersonal, and intrapersonal—defined the complicated negotiations that these young men made as they navigated emergent adulthood. Many participants resolved this bind through the process of disconnection which allowed them to gain the emotional distance that they needed to protect themselves from further harm. There were also moments where young men navigated the relational bind by leaning into their relationships and asking for help.

### *Evidence of Relational Capacity*

Despite stereotypes about Black and Latino emergent adult men being failures and absent from their communities (Aronson, 2003), many participants indicated that they were motivated by the relationships in their lives. Participants described working hard for their children, being an excellent father to them, and being able to provide stability for them. Others described wanting to improve so they could have a future where they could give back to their families and friends. These findings support the conceptualizations of Roy and Dyson's (2010) work with low-income fathers and Umamaheswar and Tados's (2022) work with incarcerated fathers, where they identified that these men, despite barriers, were working to create meaningful relationships with their families.

These men defied stereotypes of failure and shattered preconceptions about their emotional capacity (Kramer et al., 2021). The participants in this study demonstrated a profound ability for emotional connection. They shared powerful and vulnerable reflections during their

interviews, offering a glimpse into their emotional journey. Each participant identified at least one person who served as their safe space – someone they trusted and could consistently depend on to share their thoughts or feelings. These findings suggest that these young men grappled with complex relational challenges that often left them feeling confused and unsure of how to proceed. While they most often relied on hegemonic masculinity norms and disconnected from relationships, leaving them isolated, they also demonstrated their emotional capacity in specific and significant ways.

### **Contributions to Theory, Method, and Practice**

Firstly, this study's findings contribute to theories and conceptualizations regarding Black and Latino emergent adult relationships and alternative pathways to adulthood. These findings provide greater insight into the ways that these young men are managing their relationships and the impact that their relationships have on their lives. Roy and Jones (2014) called for more papers and research that explored alternative pathways to adulthood, especially in connection with young people who do not have the financial support to launch from their homes. This study gave insight into how Black and Latino young men think through the relationship challenges of emergent adulthood, given that they often still live or are connected to family members. These findings highlight a specific type of relational tension that often placed these young men at odds with their needs for independence and the obligations they maintained to their families. The findings suggested that young men moved through these pathways relatively independently and isolated.

This study also explored the effects of hegemonic masculinity on the lives of emergent adult men. By reviewing these life history interviews through a masculinity lens, conclusions could be drawn about the impact of hegemonic masculinity on relationships. The conclusions

support previous research that suggested that hegemonic masculinity reduced help-seeking behaviors and increased disconnection (Mays et al., 2018). While hegemonic masculinity may come with some health benefits (Bondoc et al., 2022), it can be a large detraction from relational health.

Throughout the study, several common stereotypes about men who endorse hegemonic masculinity, as well as Black and Latino men, were considered. These stereotypes included that they were cut off, toxic, absent, and failures (Mayo, 1997; Aronson, 2003). However, the findings suggested a more nuanced version of these young men. While these young men may still have been perceived as absent and disconnected in many ways, the life history interviews provided more context about how these young men arrived at this point. They also shed light on instances where these young men were still relationally motivated and sought out help. Despite stereotypes, these participants demonstrated social skills and relational capacity, providing a more complex understanding of Black and Latino men.

### ***Contributions to Method***

This complexity was brought to the surface because of a qualitative approach. The qualitative approach allowed for greater context, nuance, and meaning to be drawn from the lives of these participants. The context of the participants' lives created a more compassionate understanding of how they arrived at their current state. Exploring how these young men made meaning of being adults, especially as it connected to their sense of being a man and their relationships were generated because of the format in which they could share their stories.

This study contributed to methodology by using secondary data that was originally designed and collected for other purposes. By applying a greater masculinity and relationship lens during the coding process, the data set was able to reveal new insights into the participants'

lives. Secondary qualitative data sets can be extremely fruitful and used for a variety of purposes, which highlights the iterative quality of the qualitative process.

### ***Contributions to Practice***

As Black and Latino emergent adults are facing a mental health crisis, contributions to practice may be significant. As the author, I acknowledge a strong preference towards therapy given my background and training as a systemic therapist. There are several ways that the findings and subsequent conceptualizations may add to practice. Still, given the complicated bind that these young men may face in their relationships and psychological and general barriers to therapy for Black and Latino young men, therapy may not be the best option. Thus, other contributions are suggested.

**Considerations for Therapy.** As stated previously, one of the most healing parts of the therapeutic process is the relationship with the therapist (Wampold, 2001). Wampold (2015) explains that within the commons factors model, which includes the factors consistent across all therapeutic models, there are thirteen factors, with alliance, empathy, and expectations having the most significant effect sizes. Alliance is defined as the bond and the expectations of treatment between the therapist and the client; however, it is fundamentally about the feeling of authenticity and trust between therapist and client (Wampold, 2015).

Empathy is the complex process by which two human beings share a similar emotional state. It was found to significantly affect the outcome of therapy, with more empathy being correlated with better outcomes (Wampold, 2015). These common factors indicate that change in therapy happens when a real and genuine relationship between the therapist and the client is maintained as the therapist and client share emotional experiences together. Unfortunately, the

impact of hegemonic masculinity may prevent the therapist and client from reaching this critical factor in healing.

Mahalik et al., (2003) suggested that masculinity scripts can get in the way of progress for both the therapist and the client. Masculinity may prevent the client from opening up, and stereotypes about typical male expression may prevent the therapist from engaging with the client more compassionately. The findings suggested that these young men avoided talking about their feelings and used disconnection to protect themselves. Therefore, in a therapy setting where they might be expected to put themselves in an emotionally vulnerable place, disconnection may be used as a way to defend themselves, thus potentially decreasing the impact of the therapeutic relationship. The therapist should work to continue to invite the client to engage as they feel more comfortable and safer.

When a young male client has gone through the experiences these participants have gone through; the therapist may need to have increased respect and sensitivity for little moments of vulnerability. No matter how small, these moments of vulnerability should be considered a sacred space. It must be understood that when a client chooses to be vulnerable, there are several mental blocks, masculinity messages, binds, and narratives about emotional safety that he has moved through to share or identify his feelings. Thus, while that moment of vulnerability may be perceived as normative for a therapy space, it may seem like a leap of faith for him.

In Washington and Johnson's review of community agencies that worked with young Black boys (2012), results strongly indicated that young men of color respond well to and need positive male role models that mirror their racial and ethnic background. However, there is a lack of male therapists of color who get trained as mental health professionals (Stewart et al., 2017). This further decreases the level of comfort and ease that young men of color feel when

attempting to access mental health support. The biases and barriers preventing more men of color from getting trained must be further examined (Goode-Cross & Grim, 2014). Along with this, there needs to be a more concerted effort to recruit and train men of color to be mental health professionals.

**Appropriateness of therapy.** Given the relational bind that these young men faced, the appropriateness and feasibility of therapy should be considered. The intrapersonal dimension of the relational bind suggested that many of these young men felt that sharing their emotional experience would have been risky, and disconnection from relationships and emotions served as a protective mechanism. The intrapersonal dimension of the bind indicated that engaging in relational therapy may also be fraught with difficulty and tension. Therefore, individual or relational therapy may be highly challenging, given their current circumstances and challenges.

There are also many barriers to Black and Latino men in terms of getting mental health support that need to be addressed first. Some of these barriers include hegemonic masculinity messages that decrease men's help-seeking behavior and may make them more reluctant to acknowledge a potential mental health challenge (Mitchell & Perry, 2020). Other more practical barriers may include a lack of insurance, work schedules, language barriers, and income (Fortuna et al., 2008). In terms of therapy services, few interventions are designed and target men of color (Regehr et al., 2013). Thus, interventions may not be as supportive given the contextual factors that influence the stressors that bring them into therapy. Finally, stigma about mental health within communities may prevent men of color from seeking help from mental health services (Clement et al., 2015). These findings and the literature indicate that alternative interventions to traditional talk therapy should be considered and developed to support best this particular group of young men transitioning to adulthood.

**Alternate interventions.** In conjunction with the call for more therapists of color is the idea to train community organizations and people within the Black and Latino community to be more mental health informed. Providing psycho-educational classes to local communities can empower families and individuals to spot signs when mental support may be needed. One example is the Health Advocates In-Reach and Research Campaign (HAIR) at the University of Maryland. This research and advocacy group works with local barbershops and beauty salons within the Black community to empower barbers and beauticians to be health advocates in their communities. This program engaged with a primary structure within the Black community that is safe and trustworthy to improve the health and well-being of its community. Young Black men may feel safer to open up and share with their barber than with a therapist. This approach may not feel as vulnerable for these young men, and it allows them to engage with someone with a similar identity.

Bauer's et al., (2020) work with young Black boys who were processing trauma suggested that young boys felt more comfortable confiding in and seeking support from their friends than going to a mental health professional. Interventions such as peer support groups can offer significant psychological benefits to young Black and Latino men and may effectively help them address their mental health (Howard et al., 2019). In peer support groups, these young men can engage with others who understand their experiences on a personal level and receive social support in a way their families may not be able to provide. One study found that online support groups may also be an effective way to engage with peers (Stoll, 2023). An online format may allow these young men to overcome any transportation or more practical barriers that get in the way of allowing them to participate in these groups.

All of the above interventions engage with systems and communities that are already in place. Still, some young men may want to seek out therapeutic interventions, given that many of the participants had a history of trauma that could benefit from more targeted individual interventions. One such intervention is Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). Research suggests that this is an effective intervention for the processing of trauma and PTSD symptoms (Bont et al., 2016; Rousseau et al., 2021).

EMDR has also been found to be effective for various types of traumas (Denderen et al., 2018), and thus, it may be a vital intervention for diverse clients. One of the critical differences between EMDR and traditional talk therapy is that it does not require the client to relive traumatic experiences and instead focuses on free association (Lee, 2008). Given that many of the participants felt constrained by the lack of emotional safety in their home environments, this free association may allow them to process their trauma less directly. With a less direct approach, these young men may be able to engage with their traumatic experiences in a way that feels safer and less risky.

The only challenge with EMDR as it currently stands is that it is expensive, and the training is time-consuming. Licensed mental health professionals primarily practice it, and as stated previously, there is an under-representation of therapists of color (Stewart et al., 2017). Still, EMDR is a very effective intervention for processing trauma, and therefore, barriers to accessibility of these services and the types of therapists that provide EMDR should be considered.

Finally, when considering potential interventions at the family level, Attachment-Based Family Therapy (ABFT) may be an effective intervention for Black and Latino emergent adult men. ABFT is a manualized treatment with five stages that focus on parent-child relationships

(Diamond et al., 2021). The intervention's manualized nature may allow it to be taught to community leaders. This may allow families to receive this intervention from people within their community rather than needing to seek support from a mental health agency or group.

As far as this author is aware, there are no published studies that considered the effectiveness of ABFT for families of color or studies that have looked at the use of ABFT with families who have emergent adult children. Still, ABFT has been found to help repair attachment ruptures between the child and parent, demonstrated effectiveness in decreasing symptoms of depression in adolescents, and helped young families create better emotional support (Waraan et al., 2021; Santens et al., 2017). As these findings suggested, the impact of the provider role on these participants was significant and contributed to the relational bind felt in emergent adulthood. Therefore, a therapeutic approach that targets potential ruptures between child and parent may be especially helpful in resolving the relational bind.

### **Limitations**

One of the typical limitations of qualitative approaches is the generalizability of the findings. In this study, 20 life history interviews were coded to learn more about masculinity and its effects on relationships. While 20 participants certainly provided a lot of insight and nuance, the sample size is not big enough to make generalizations about entire populations of young Black and Latino men. Another barrier to generalization is that the sample only covered two populations from two youth centers in urban Maryland neighborhoods. Insights around Black and Latino emergent adults who grew up in more rural or suburban areas would be impossible to draw from this data set.

Another limitation of this study was that it was a secondary data set, and I have yet to meet or interact with any participants. I was limited to transcriptions of each interview that was

selected. I did not get to make inferences based on tonal quality or facial expressions. This put me at a certain distance from the real people that I was reading about. In some ways, this may have given me a different viewpoint on the interviews and allowed me to make more fresh insights, still being able to be in the room and know the participants in a more authentic way could have helped to bring out their stories in more authentic ways.

Along with the fact that this study was a secondary data analysis, I did not get to craft my questions. One of the things that I grappled with early on was that the interview questions needed to lend themselves to questions about masculinity or relationship functioning. These concepts had to be drawn out, and my thesis advisor, Dr. Kevin Roy, selected participants who had the most to say about masculinity. Being able to craft questions for the interview that were more focused on masculinity and relationships may have provided more direct insights.

Finally, I did not get to make many inferences about the differences between Black and Latino participants. There were a few instances in the data where there may have been suggestions about the impact of culture. While I mentioned the impact of culture minimally in the literature review, and it was brought up a few times in the findings section, there was not enough to make clear distinctions about the impact of culture on participants' experience.

### **Future Directions**

One of the most striking parts of the interviews was the participants' relationships with their mothers. The caretakers that participants described sounded just as stressed and overwhelmed as the participants. I am curious how they perceive the disconnection that their young men go through as they make a break from the past. Do they notice when their sons begin to pull away? What are the actions that they experience as they do this? How do they feel about

their son's transition into adulthood? How would they define what it means to be a man, and how are they helping their sons get there?

I would love to repeat this study with similar questions but from the mothers' perspective to draw conclusions about what it is like for them as their sons learn to navigate these relationships. In connection with that, a qualitative study that treats the dyad of mother and son as a unit could be incredibly powerful. Studying how they navigate the expectations of emergent adulthood together may yield conceptualizations illuminating pathways to adulthood from both sides of the transition.

As a researcher, I am entering a doctoral program focused on clinical interventions and learning. Therefore, if I take a more clinical approach to the future directions, I would want to examine what going to therapy is like for young men like these participants. Most participants had a rich trauma history that would be especially important to understand how to work with. Do these young men feel comfortable in therapy? What is their preferred method for processing traumatic experiences? How do we make therapy more accessible for populations like this? How does a systems therapist work with the family system of young men like the ones in this study? The findings from these questions could provide significant implications for community organizations, practice, and treatment modality modifications.

**Tables**

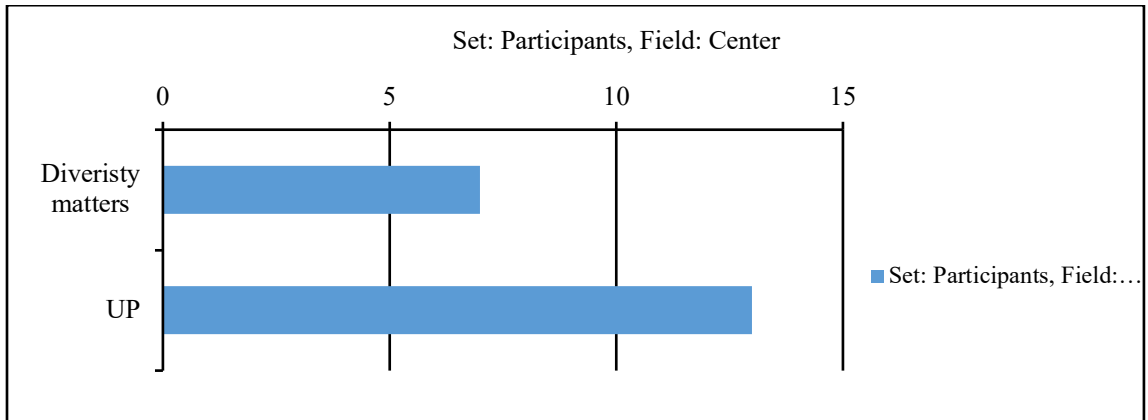
**Table 1**

Participant Pseudo	Race/Ethnicity	Center	Age
<i>Fernando</i>	Latino	Riverdale	18
<i>Emani</i>	Latino	Riverdale	18
<i>Mano</i>	Latino	Riverdale	18
<i>Scuba</i>	Latino	Riverdale	18
<i>Duarte</i>	Latino	Riverdale	20
<i>Esteban</i>	Latino	Riverdale	20
<i>Kendall</i>	African American	Riverdale	21
<i>Snoop</i>	African American	YO	17
<i>DeOntte</i>	African American	YO	17
<i>Empire</i>	African American	YO	18
<i>Steffan</i>	African American	YO	18
<i>Kwame</i>	African American	YO	19
<i>Matt</i>	Latino	YO	20
<i>DJ</i>	African American	YO	20
<i>Andrew</i>	Latino	YO	21
<i>Fry</i>	African American	YO	21
<i>Tyler</i>	African American	YO	21
<i>Old Cat</i>	African American	YO	22
<i>Isaiah</i>	African American	YO	22
<i>Young One</i>	African American	YO	

*Note:* A list of all the pseudonyms for each participant as well as race or ethnicity, the center they attended, and their age, for reader’s reference.

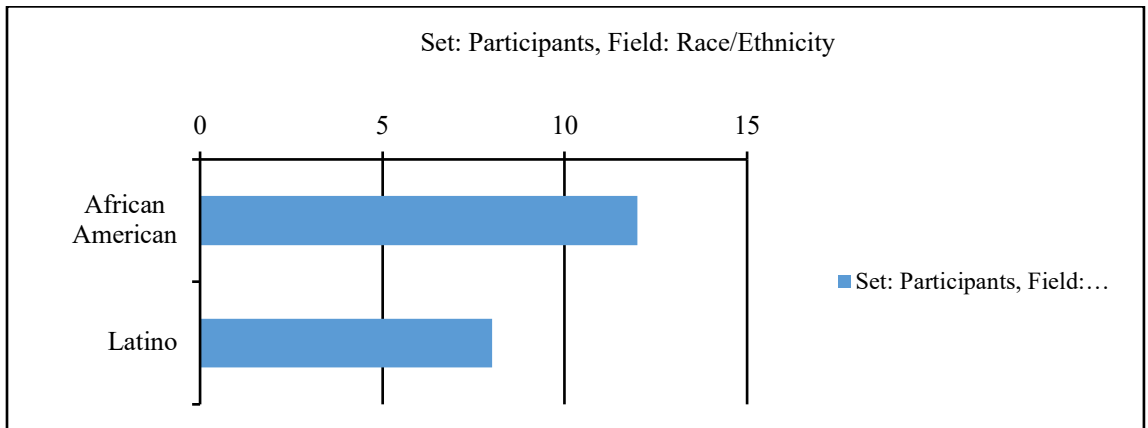
**Figures**

*Figure 1: Center Demographics*



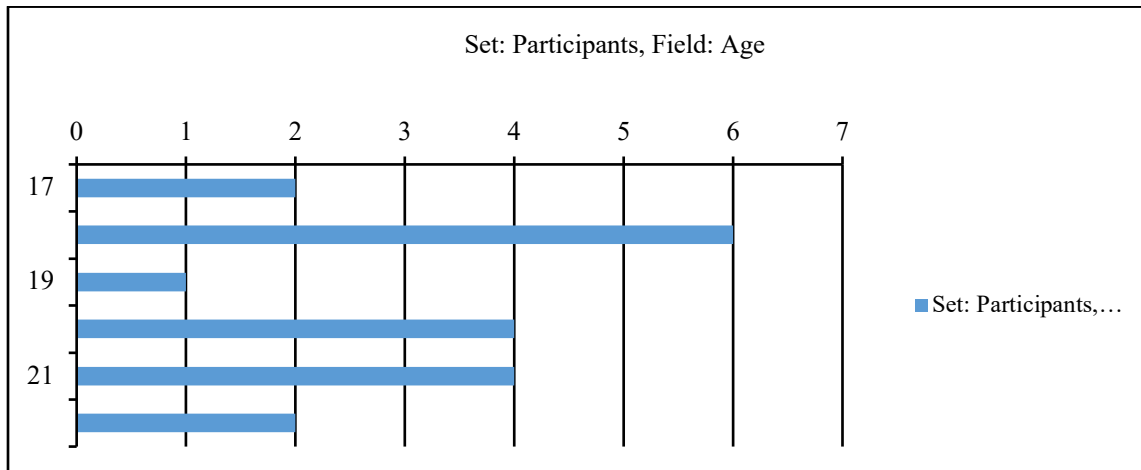
*Note:* Figure 1 notes the number of participants who attended the Diversity Matters Program in Riverdale, MD, or the Urban Progress Center in Baltimore, MD.

*Figure 2: Sample Race & Ethnicity*



*Note:* Figure 2 notes the number of participants who were either African American or Latino in the sample.

Figure 3: Sample Age



Note: Figure 3 notes the number of participants that fall within a particular age demographic.

**Appendix A**

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>COPING STRATEGIES</b>	What are their coping strategies to deal with the exposure to stress?
<b>CURRENT EXPOSURE TO STRESS</b>	Any evidence of current exposure to stress in emergent adulthood
<b>EMERGING ADULTHOOD</b>	Events or milestones related to emergent adulthood
<b>CAREER</b>	What are their career goals? What is the purpose of a career in emergent adulthood? How are they preparing for it?
<b>DISCONNECTION FROM COMMUNITY</b>	How are they making breaks from the past in order to establish themselves now?
<b>FAMILY</b>	What are their relationship or family goals for emergent adulthood?
<b>FINANCES</b>	How are they navigating their financial situation? How are they describing money?
<b>FUTURE GOALS</b>	What are their hopes and aspirations for the future?
<b>MODELING</b>	What role models for future adulthood are they drawing from or resisting?
<b>SELF-'SUFFICIENCY</b>	How do they demonstrate increasing independence? When do those expectations start?
<b>EXPOSURE TO STRESS IN CHILDHOOD</b>	Events of high stress during childhood
<b>ADULTIFICATION</b>	Experiences of being put in adult roles
<b>PARENTAL CONFLICT</b>	Stories about conflict within a parental unit
<b>EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE</b>	Any experiences of violence during childhood
<b>INCARCERATION</b>	Experiences of being placed in prison
<b>LOW-'SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND</b>	Stress related to decreased financial resources
<b>MASCULINITY</b>	How do these young men express their masculinity?
<b>AGGRESSION</b>	Events or stories related to the expression of aggression
<b>DISTANCING AND DISCONNECTION</b>	Ways that men demonstrate distancing behaviors as a result of masculinity.
<b>EMOTIONAL REPRESSION</b>	Evidence of hiding, pushing aside, or covering emotional expression. Either within their lives or in the interview.
<b>ENTITLEMENT TO WOMEN</b>	What are their relationships like with women?

<b>PROVIDER</b>	Stories or experiences where participants described providing any kind of resource for their family, especially financial
<b>SEXUALIZATION</b>	How do they describe their sexual behaviors?
<b>WEAKNESS</b>	What do they describe as weak, how do they explain weakness?
<b>MISCELLANEOUS</b>	Events or stories that may feel important but do not fall into any particular code
<b>NUGGETS</b>	Events or quotes that are powerful and hit the reader. Could be used for when writing the finding section later.
<b>PROVERBS</b>	Lessons learned but the action is not congruent.
<b>SOCIAL SKILLS</b>	Evidence of hidden relational capacity demonstrated through skills that can be used in a variety of social circumstances
<b>WOMEN BUT NO ONE</b>	"I have relationships but I perceive that I can't rely on them at all"
<b>RELATIONSHIPS</b>	What are the important relationships in the lives of these men and how are they engaging with them.
<b>HELP SEEKING</b>	Evidence or stories where the participant reached out to another person to get support or resources for a problem they were facing.
<b>IMPORTANT PEOPLE</b>	Who are the people that these men consider important? Their mothers? Sisters? Fathers?
<b>LOSS OF THE RELATIONAL DISCONNECTION FROM COMMUNITY</b>	Stories or instances of disconnection What are the instances where these men disconnected from their community and why?
<b>RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS</b>	Many of these young men describe their relationships to their peers. How are they managing that relationship?
<b>DISCONNECTION FROM FAMILY</b>	How do these young men disconnect from family? Why do they do it? When do they do it?
<b>DISCONNECTION FROM SELF</b>	In what ways have these men disconnected from their sense of self? Ignoring needs, dismissing emotions

Appendix: List of Codes used during Axial phase of coding and their descriptions.

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