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RACIAL AND GENDER IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE INVOLVEMENT: PERSPECTIVES FROM MALE ADOLESCENTS IN MARGINALIZED NEIGHBORHOODS

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Purpose: In racially-segregated communities, youth are exposed to racism and other forms of violence, which impacts developmental experiences, shapes gender-inequitable attitudes, and increases risk for violence involvement. Understanding links between masculinity, racism, and experiences of violence is crucial for designing violence prevention interventions. The purpose of this study was to explore male youths' conceptions of manhood, influences on manhood, and challenges in navigating the pressure of becoming men in the context of neighborhood disadvantage and structural racism.

Methods: We conducted semi-structured interviews among a purposive subsample of predominantly African American male youth, ages 13 to 19, participating in a community-partnered sexual violence prevention trial across 20 neighborhoods with concentrated disadvantage in Pittsburgh, PA from 2015-2017 (n=52). Interviews explored youths' definitions of manhood, influences on manhood, and intersections with racial identity and racism. We used an iterative coding process to identify developing themes. The lead analyst and research assistant dual-coded 14 interviews to refine themes and develop the final codebook. Research team members met regularly to ensure coherence of the codebook and discuss identified themes.

Results: The dominant definitions of manhood described men as responsible ([being a man means] "taking care of all of your responsibilities") and as providers, "to be a man you have to be strong, you have to be [a] hard worker, caring, care for your family, provide for your family." Growing into manhood was often viewed as a journey by the participants—both as a process of overcoming life's challenges, "I have a big influence from my grandfather. He's been through a lot in his life and it takes a man to go through that and keep pushing," and as a process of becoming a moral agent, "as a man you have to know the right from wrong." Many participants related this process to their racial identity—with one participant specifying that for him being an African American man meant to be proud in the face of racism, "I am Black but I am a proud Black African American. I am proud of my skin tone and ain't nobody ever gonna take that from me." Others described unique obstacles that they faced due to racist stereotypes, "people are like, they are always like 'oh he's Black, he's gonna try and hurt us or be a gangster or something.'" In the process of growing into manhood, Black participants at times felt that the stakes were especially high for them—with negative stereotypes and encounters with police creating a risk-laden process.

Conclusions: These stories suggest that the process of entering manhood comes with unique challenges for adolescents who do so in the context of racism. The ability to take risks while exploring masculinity is fraught with the danger of being viewed through a lens of racist stereotypes and having to grapple with the consequences of racism. Being mindful of intersections between masculinity and racial injustice can inform violence prevention programs that address the lived experiences of minority male youth in neighborhoods with concentrated disadvantage.