



# Project H.E.A.R.T. Executive Summary

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## Method

**Purpose:** To explore the perspectives of Black male teens of suicide risk in their communities and to inform stakeholders.

**Research Question:** What are Black male teens' perspectives of suicide risk?

**Method:** Photovoice, a qualitative participatory action research method (Wang & Burris, 1997), which incorporates documentary photography, feminist principles, and critical consciousness literature to capture societal issues from the lens of those impacted and to influence policy.

**Participants:** Seven adolescents from a youth leadership and mentoring organization, Young Brothers Academy (YBA), focused on supporting the academic, social, and personal development of Black adolescent males in Greenville, South Carolina.

**Data Collection:** First photovoice session: Discussed participants' perspectives of suicide risk and issues of power and ethics involved in the study, and familiarized the group with the photovoice method and the use of cameras (Wang, 1999). Emphasized that the participants were the experts in this study. In between the two photovoice sessions: Gave participants one week to take pictures of their perspectives on the topic in their everyday lives. Second photovoice session: Selected photographs, contextualized findings, and codified themes (Wang, 1999). Discussed selected photos using the **SHOWeD** framework (Wang, 1999): What do you **S**ee here?, What is really **H**appening here?, How does this relate to **O**ur lives?, Why does this situation, concern, or strength **E**xist?, and What can we **D**o about it? Added the question What do **WE** see here? (Smith et al., 2012) to allow for group analysis of the photos.

**Data Analysis:** A collaborative and reflective process with participants in which they discussed the issues, their experiences, and anticipated action (Wang, 1999). Participants worked together to codify the issues, themes, or theories that surfaced from their photos and discussion.

**Data Presentation:** Collaborated with participants to develop a plan to share photographs and stories with policymakers and community leaders (Wang, 1999). Participants decided that school administrators, school counselors, YBA, and other Black teens should hear their findings via an article, news and social media outlets, and a YBA event.

## Findings

### **Overarching Theme: *Everyone Has Their Own Narrative and Lens***

Appreciation of the diversity of each other's and other Black male teens' stories and circumstances and the sense they make of their situation.

### **Subthemes: *Risk Factors and Hope***

#### ***Risk Factors***

- Inherent risks and difficulties that come with being a Black male teen
- Black teens must work harder than their peers and navigate life on an uneven playing ground leading to fatigue and burnout
- Feeling alone and isolated in certain environments where they are not well represented
- Lack of time and attention to be able to grow and flourish as individuals
- Sadness
- Difficult to find people to talk to about their struggles

#### ***Hope***

- Importance of making choices that will improve their circumstances
- Importance of staying focused on goals
- Importance of having time and energy to focus on their growth and figuring out who they are
- Importance of community and support in helping them grow and reach their full potential
- Importance of having people to talk to about their struggles
- Importance of developing coping mechanisms and interests to deal with stressors
- Importance of having hope that their circumstances can get better
- Importance of exposure to nature in their mental well-being

## **Policy and Counseling Recommendations**

Findings from Project H.E.A.R.T. illustrate that suicide risk and resilience among Black male teens are shaped by the interactions between individual experiences and the systems in which those experiences unfold. Participants' photographs and discussions revealed recurring themes of isolation, emotional exhaustion, and difficulty identifying trusted adults, alongside strong expressions of hope rooted in growth, connection, and support. These findings suggest that effective suicide prevention requires coordinated responses that extend beyond individual-level intervention and address access, capacity, and engagement within youth-serving systems.

## **Reinvesting in Schools as Central Sites of Prevention and Support**

Throughout the group discussion, participants identified schools as a primary environment where mental health support should be visible, accessible, and normalized. Experiences of isolation and burnout were frequently described in school contexts, underscoring the role that educational settings play in shaping teens' daily experiences. From a policy standpoint, these findings support the need for dedicated, recurring appropriations within state and federal education budgets to expand school-based mental health programming. Sustainable funding rather than short-term initiatives allows school districts to develop stable mental health infrastructure, including the hiring and retention of School Counselors, school-based Mental Health Counselors, and other on-site providers. Such investment aligns with participants' expressed need for consistent access to trusted adults and supports earlier engagement with mental health care, before distress escalates.

## **Strengthening the School-Based Mental Health Workforce**

Project H.E.A.R.T. findings also highlight the practical challenges of expanding school-based services without corresponding investment in the mental health workforce. Participants described difficulty identifying adults they felt comfortable talking to, suggesting that access to support is influenced not only by availability, but by the stability and continuity of provider presence within schools. To address this gap, policymakers may consider establishing a mental health workforce development line item that supports loan repayment, scholarships, paid placements, and competitive compensation for school-based providers, particularly in high-need districts. Workforce investment functions as a structural mechanism that makes service expansion feasible by improving recruitment and retention while also strengthening long-term capacity through partnerships with higher education institutions and training programs.

## **Advancing Mental Health Literacy and Utilization Through Cross-Sector Investment**

Participants emphasized the importance of discussing emotional well-being more openly, particularly within schools. These insights highlight the need for prevention strategies that address not only access but also utilization. From a policy perspective, legislatures may pursue joint investment across education and public health budgets to support age-appropriate mental health education, school staff training, and broader awareness efforts. Such investments can reinforce early engagement, improve recognition of emotional distress, and ensure that existing support is used to its full potential.

## Counseling Practice Implications

In addition to policy considerations, Project H.E.A.R.T. offers important guidance for counseling practice. Participants' narratives underscore the importance of relationship-centered approaches that prioritize trust, consistency, and responsiveness to teens' lived experiences. Counselors working with Black male teens in school and community settings should attend to themes of isolation, burnout, and premature responsibility while intentionally reinforcing protective factors identified by participants. Protective themes such as connection, creativity, faith, nature, and goal development emerged as central to participants' sense of hope. These findings support the use of strengths-based and participatory approaches that elevate youth voices and encourage engagement through modalities that resonate with teens' everyday experiences.

Together, the findings from Project H.E.A.R.T. demonstrate that sustainable suicide prevention for Black male teens requires coordinated investment in school-based supports, workforce capacity, and early engagement strategies. By leveraging existing fiscal mechanisms, such as recurring appropriations, workforce incentives, and cross-agency funding, policymakers can translate youth-identified needs into durable, system-level actions that promote well-being and access to care.

## References

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