

The Experiences of Ujamaa Men with COVID-19, Police Brutality, and Social Unrest

A summary of findings from key informant interviews

About the study

In 2020, Ujamaa Place partnered with Wilder Research to learn about the experiences of men in their programs (“Ujamaa Men”) related to COVID-19, police brutality, and the social unrest following the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. The majority of Ujamaa Men are Black and underemployed, so they have a higher likelihood of experiencing police brutality and being negatively affected by COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Graham et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2020). This study illuminates the ways in which Ujamaa Men have been affected by these health and safety crises, with a particular focus on their experience as Black men, some with a criminal background, who are systemically barred from numerous income generation opportunities.

Methods

Wilder Research completed nine semi-structured interviews with Ujamaa Men in November and December 2020. Five out of nine respondents said they have been an Ujamaa Man for more than a year; the other respondents had been attending Ujamaa Place programming for a few months.

The interview protocol that Wilder used during the interview was developed in consultation with Ujamaa Place. Ujamaa Place selected program participants to be interview respondents and provided Wilder staff with their contact information to schedule interviews. Interview respondents received an incentive from Ujamaa Place as a thank you for their participation.

Findings

Goals to work on with Ujamaa Place

Respondents were asked about their needs and goals they have worked on with Ujamaa Place. All respondents said that meeting their basic needs, such as having stable housing and employment are particularly important to them. More than half (n=5) of respondents discussed their progress toward their goals by taking financial literacy classes and other technical skills classes, such as photography or music production classes. Additionally, two respondents plan to get a driver’s license or open a bank account.

My goals are getting my license back, opening a bank account, and looking for some stable jobs.

My goal is to get my own housing and get a new job or start a new business.... The financial literacy class I took has been very helpful; I know how to budget and know where to spend my money.

Some of the goals I have are becoming a photographer and developing my own business. The instructor is a film producer who trains me. We make music videos and take trips to see all the 'behind the scenes.' I hope to take more classes in the future. It is a great experience and opportunity.

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for Ujamaa Men

When asked about ways that their life has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, interview participants offered a variety of answers. Five out of nine respondents either lost their employment or had their hours reduced. A few respondents (n=3) discussed limited social interaction and physical contact with loved ones, saying that this has taken a toll on their emotional and mental health. One respondent shared that they know a lot of people who have died because of COVID-19.

It makes me make less money. I love the job. I am working now, but at the beginning [of COVID-19] I was laid off. Emotionally I am affected too because I cannot do certain things. I feel a bit more isolated.

I lost a lot of people to COVID-19. I lost employment. I lost money.

The biggest way it affects me is more or less the [lack of] contact and communication with my friends, and peers and staff in Ujamaa Place. Without having the physical contact, it took a hit on my mental health.

Impact of the killing of George Floyd and following social unrest for Ujamaa Men

Interview respondents were asked about how the death of George Floyd and following social unrest affected them. All respondents expressed concerns about the risks of being a Black man; most respondents personally related to this event because they have first-hand experience with police brutality or they have known others who have been brutalized by the police. Two respondents shared that the killing of George Floyd influenced the conversations that they had with their kids about the role of police in their life. Some respondents said that the killing of George Floyd negatively impacted their mental health, and others said that it inspired them to get involved with community efforts to bring about police reform.

My daughter wonders if the police is here to protect us or hurt us. It is hard to have a conversation [about racism and police brutality] with a 5-year-old. I joined a march and it empowered me—that was a bittersweet moment.

I am a Black man. I do not really know how to untangle it. All of it stressed me out but I do not know what to say. I am not shocked. It happened to me recently when I was doing Door Dash. The police pulled me over because my car was previously owned by a pastor. The police pointed the gun at me. It was a very stressful situation for me. I was shocked by the uproar [in response to George Floyd's murder]. The police was in jail but not convicted. When George Floyd died, it was not just him dying. It makes me think about my life.

Resources that Ujamaa Men received from Ujamaa Place during the pandemic and social unrest

All interview respondents said that Ujamaa Place has been supportive of their needs during the pandemic and social unrest. The respondents have received a wide range of resources and services such as housing, meals, classes, job search help, job skill training, and social support. When asked

what has been the most useful or helpful to them among all the resources they received from Ujamaa Place, respondents most frequently mentioned housing and food as most helpful.

Housing right now is the most important. I am there now [in Ujamaa Place housing] and I do not know where it will lead. I could be living on the street right now, but they let me stay there.

Some respondents also appreciated access to protective gear, such as masks and sanitizer. Other respondents said that they appreciated being able to visit with staff and other Ujamaa Men at Ujamaa Place, and to receive mental health resources. Overall, interview respondents shared the important role that Ujamaa Place plays in providing them with social and mental health resources.

*The most useful or helpful, especially during COVID-19, is that they have free masks. I was fired from my job because of my background so I was not in a situation to buy anything. They gave me hand sanitizer, masks for my daughter and myself. They gave us lunches, dinners, and bus passes. Being able to go there and talk to somebody is very useful. I used their mental health resources. It is helpful for me to unwind and have someone listen to me. For me, the main focus is the mental health. I take it seriously for myself. I am super grateful for them offering the mental health service. They do it with open arms, without judgement. **They are accepting of who you are.***

Plans for future involvement with Ujamaa Place

Interview respondents were asked about how they plan to be involved with Ujamaa Place moving forward. All respondents have plans to stay connected with Ujamaa Place to varying degrees. Many respondents plan to pay-it-forward by engaging and sharing their life experiences with other Ujamaa Men and by helping to connect their friends and acquaintances with Ujamaa Place. Some respondents intend to help expand the current programming and others said that they want to coach or teach classes. There were a few respondents who plan on taking more classes to continue building their skills.

They help me and I will always speak highly of them and help recruit other people to come to them.

I want to work with a recreation center and to form a Ujamaa Place basketball team. I want to have my own program and run all those programs with youth. Honestly, I am 28. From 21 to 27 I was in prison. You can turn the negative to positive.

My buddy and I are talking to [Ujamaa Place] on how we can enhance the curriculum and on how they can improve. I know that they are shifting and continuing to grow. I want to help the organization to do that and to expand. I want to be involved with that by giving input.

*Once I have everything together, I would like to come back and help in whatever capacity I can be helpful—with the music group or the entrepreneur class. When I first came to Ujamaa, I got into an automobile class. Because of that, I knew how to take care of a car before having my own car. They gave me a community and family. **Ujamaa means family. I just feel like I will always have a place to go back. It is a pick-me-up place.***

Issues to consider

The information gathered from interviews indicated that Ujamaa Men have been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, police brutality, and the social unrest following the murder of George Floyd. The data also showed that Ujamaa Place has played a vital role in supporting these individuals during these health and safety crises.

Based on the information we received from these interviews, the following are a few points for Ujamaa Place to consider for future planning and programming:

- Continue offering temporary housing and meals programs to participants when it is possible during these crises. Participants mentioned that housing and meal supports have been the most helpful service they received from Ujamaa Place during this time.
- Continue to provide access to the Ujamaa Place office location as well as the services that occur there, such as help with resume building and mental health supports.
- Consider ways for participants to get more involved with program planning or curriculum design. Some participants were interested in designing new classes or social groups.

References

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For more information

This summary presents key findings from interviews of Ujamaa Men about their experiences with COVID-19, police brutality, and social unrest. For more information about this report, contact Ryan Evans at Wilder Research, 651-280-2677.

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