



Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities

Making the Case to Help Young Men of Color Succeed



September 2015

Photo credits:

Tyrone Turner: cover, pgs. 3, 6, 8, 11, 14 (upper photo), 15

Ed Kashi VII: pgs. 4 and 19

Lynn Johnson Photography: pgs. 12, 14 (lower photo)

All photos are various participants in RWJF's grantee initiatives.

Note:

All sample stories presented in this guide use fictitious character names. They have been included solely for illustrative purposes.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Research and Methodology	4
Background	6
What Works—Our Recommendations	9
1: Talk About What All Kids Need	9
2: Show, Don't Tell	11
3: Tell Solution Stories	13
4: Use Values-Based Words and Messages	15
5: Deploy Trusted Messengers.....	20
Conclusion.....	22
References	23

Introduction

AS THE NATION'S LARGEST PHILANTHROPY devoted solely to the public's health, we at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation have a unique capacity and responsibility to address the most pressing health issues facing our society today.

Through our investments in children, families, and communities, we aim to create equal opportunities for individuals to pursue the best health possible, while exploring cutting-edge ideas with the potential to accelerate progress for all. For more than 40 years, we have worked to improve health and health care. We are striving to build a national Culture of Health that will enable all to live longer, healthier lives now and for generations to come. We seek, as well, to address the disparities in health and opportunity that impact far too many Americans based on their race, zip code, sexuality, or other demographic factors.

Since beginning Forward Promise in 2011, we have taken a specific interest in promoting health and opportunity for young men of color (YMOC), ages 12 to 18. We focus on this population because the experiences and decisions that many of these young men face make their path to adulthood especially difficult and have a profound effect on their health and well-being throughout their lives.

Young men of color are more likely to grow up in poverty, live in unsafe neighborhoods, and attend under-resourced, overcrowded schools. Moreover, actions that would be treated as youthful mistakes for young white men are often judged and punished more severely for young men of color. While these challenges are by no means new, as we have seen through recent events, they are just as relevant and pressing to address as they have ever been.

While any one of these obstacles alone is a challenge, together they create significant barriers that impact the health, education, and livelihoods of this population. Over time, these life challenges lead to lower graduation rates, a higher chance of going to prison, and a greater likelihood of dying from homicide. With each new generation of young men, these obstacles become even more pervasive and often extinguish the spark of hope or drive that all young people need to carry them into adulthood. Therefore, we see our work on Forward Promise as an integral component of the Foundation's larger effort to build a Culture of Health across the nation.

Unfortunately, there is a well-documented empathy gap in how Americans commonly perceive young men of color and the barriers they face. To that end, the Foundation decided to explore how support can be grown across the philanthropy sector and diverse public populations for effective solutions for these young men.



Through research that spanned the course of nearly two years, we researched and developed messaging strategies that can raise awareness and support for investing in YMOC. The success of this research, we hope, will help yield more support for solutions that remove barriers and create the opportunities these vulnerable young men need to succeed. Our findings and analysis are summarized in this toolkit with recommendations for how to apply our findings to your work.

We are deeply grateful to our research team—Westen Strategies, Fenton Communications, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, and Wonder: Strategies for Good—who together led the research, developed the messaging strategies, and created this toolkit. We look forward to conversations with you about the findings and recommendations we offer. Please contact us if you have questions or ideas. We welcome your input.

Dwayne Proctor
Director and Senior Adviser
Program Portfolios

Research and Methodology

Our research examined the impact that different messaging and storytelling strategies can have on garnering support for programs that support young men of color. Through focus groups and online surveys administered to adults from diverse populations across the United States, we were able to identify a range of successful communications strategies that resonated across audiences.

It is our hope that these strategies can help groups, organizations, individuals, and other stakeholders more effectively talk about the work that they do and gain greater support for programs/interventions for young men of color overall.

Research Objectives

- Understand the attitudes and value systems that influence how our audiences think about these issues so we can reach them;
- Develop messaging that resonates best with the average American; and
- Build support for targeted interventions that help young men of color.



Research Approach:

FOCUS GROUPS

We conducted a total of eight focus groups with white, black, and Latino audiences in Denver, Philadelphia, and Raleigh, N.C. Six of the groups focused on YMOC-related topics, while two groups focused on social factors that impact the health of vulnerable populations more generally. The two groups that focused on vulnerable populations also added great value to the young men of color portion of the research.

NATIONAL SURVEY

After an extensive analysis of the focus groups, we then conducted an in-depth online survey with a representative sample of 1,209 U.S. adults. The survey employed a complex split-sample design that tested a wide range of communications strategies to discuss race and young men of color. These included messaging statements for targeted interventions that help young men of color, as well as specific narratives describing the impacts of these interventions.

Respondents were also able to provide real-time reactions to a series of audio messages that made the case for the importance of targeted interventions, as well as those intentionally designed to undermine the case for intervening. We purposefully tested both supportive and oppositional messages to ensure that our messages could succeed in a real-world context. The online format also allowed respondents to explain their assessments in an open-ended manner, resulting in a wealth of rich qualitative content for analysis.

IMPLICIT BIAS TESTING

These findings were then integrated into a follow-up online survey conducted by Westen Strategies that tested how 1,006 voters responded to the top four messages emerging from initial phases of the research. This survey employed an innovative "implicit bias" technique to identify which messages are most effective at both the conscious and unconscious levels.

Background



To understand how to effectively foster support for promising programs for young men of color, we must first understand the existing lay of the land.

Barriers to Understanding

The public's existing beliefs and attitudes impact their ability to empathize with young men of color and acknowledge the challenges they face. Of particular importance is the fact that most Americans prefer to avoid conversations about diversity and race altogether.

For one, many white Americans tend to view racial discrimination as a thing of the past. This world view makes it hard to readily accept the idea that young men of color continue to experience significant barriers to health because of their race or ethnicity. Often, white Americans look for other reasons that disparities exist, such as the breakdown of an individual's family.

Research has found this may be tied to the fact that a majority of white Americans still move through the world with limited knowledge and interaction with people of color. According to a 2013 survey from the Public Religion Research Institute, white social networks are 91 percent white, compared to black networks, which are 65 percent homogenous, or Hispanic networks, which are 46 percent homogenous (Jones et al. 2013). This means that most white Americans are less likely to hear about racial discrimination or inequity from someone they know.

White Americans are also more likely to believe that anti-white bias is a bigger societal problem than anti-black bias. Researchers at Tufts University discovered that whites view racial preference as a zero-sum game. They believe that efforts to reduce discrimination against blacks has directly led to more discrimination against whites—a trend not reflected in blacks' own perceptions (Norton and Sommers 2011). As a result, whites often assume that giving more help to young men of color means giving less help to everyone else.

Mindset Matters

Focus group participants in our research, across all racial backgrounds, strongly believed that a person's mindset or motivation was a major factor in explaining whether or not that individual can overcome adversity. More than race or ethnicity, participants consistently blamed bad choices, lack of a work ethic, or a lack of an inner desire to change as reasons a person would remain in poverty.

These beliefs did not prevent participants from having hope or embracing solutions, however. In fact, there was heartfelt support for people who tried hard to make their lives better. Still, participants believed there are some people who will never change or can never be helped, and felt suggesting otherwise was naïve.

The Empathy Gap

Through our research, we found Americans generally see young men of color as “others” or a “them,” rather than as part of a greater “we.” This attitude suggests that overall our society lacks empathy for young men of color. *Empathy* means genuinely understanding another person's perspective or point of view, even if you disagree with it. It is the feeling of putting yourself in another person's shoes.

From social psychology research, we know that shared identity helps to facilitate empathy, and that race or ethnicity is one important shared identity. When that shared identity is absent, though, people make decisions with more judgment than empathy.

Because biased messages about people of color permeate our media, culture, schools, and courts, we are all susceptible to implicit bias, and research has demonstrated this includes people of color themselves (Nosek et al. 2002; Rutland et al. 2005).

As shown by researchers at the University of Colorado Boulder, participants in four studies consistently shot armed and unarmed black targets in a video game more rapidly and more frequently than white targets. Researchers documented the same levels of bias *whether the participants were black or white* (Correll et al. 2002).

A Difficult Conversation

Most Americans believe our nation has made great strides in eliminating racism, but it is still difficult for them to talk about race and prejudice—especially the structural nature of racism. Many even think that our nation no longer needs to engage in discussions about race and racism. A recent [YouGov study](#) (Moore 2015) learned that most white Americans, and roughly half of Latino Americans, believe our nation talks too much about race, while black Americans feel the exact opposite.

According to Derald Wing Sue, author of *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence*, these aversions to discussion of race may have to do with societal norms and personal comfort level. “To preserve harmonious, interpersonal relationships, there are certain topics that are taboo and we have to tiptoe around them in order not to offend others,” Sue explains in an interview (Trent 2015). In addition, he adds, people don’t want to acknowledge color, “because if you do, it may indicate that you are racist and biased.”

Additional Challenges to Discussing Race

- While we all want a better future for all young men, it is important to sound realistic. The messages in our research were most effective when we acknowledged that real change takes time and hard work. When we painted too rosy a picture, audiences became skeptical.
- There is widespread distrust of government and belief that it wastes taxpayer dollars. Our most effective messages highlighted programs run by nonprofits or religious organizations. We also had greater success talking about changing government policies (e.g., eliminating zero-tolerance discipline policies in schools), which presumably costs nothing, rather than implementing new government programs that would cost money.



What Works—Our Recommendations

From our research, we determined the following five recommendations will help your messages be more accessible and impactful when you want to grow support for your programs among broad, diverse audiences.

Recommendation 1: Talk About What All Kids Need

Recommendation 2: Show, Don't Tell

Recommendation 3: Tell Solution Stories

Recommendation 4: Use Values-Based Words and Messages

Recommendation 5: Deploy Trusted Messengers

1: Talk About What All Kids Need

The best way to build empathy for young men of color is to appeal to audiences' identities as parents and adults who care about the well-being of young people. This makes it imperative that our messages establish how young men of color are like all young people before we can introduce how they are different.

Specifically, messages in our research were much more successful when they began the conversation by talking about *what all teenagers need*, especially teenage boys. From there, we could safely introduce facts about the barriers that made teenage life even harder for young men of color. We did not say or even imply that young men of color are different. Instead, we focused on how their *barriers* are different.

What Worked: Sample Message

What All Teenagers Need: Any parent can tell you that the teenage years are hard. That's especially true for teenage boys. They are more likely than girls to engage in risky behavior like smoking or drinking. Young men of color have it even harder. They are more likely to grow up in poverty, with challenging family situations, or in violence-ridden neighborhoods. When young people do not have the basics—like food, or a safe place to live, or a loving family—they are more likely to fall behind and act out in class, or even drop out of school altogether. We need to teach young men that a better future is possible by giving them mentors, like teachers and coaches, who have overcome similar challenges in their own lives and counselors who help them make healthy choices. If we teach our young men the skills to be resilient and responsible adults, they will have a much better chance of succeeding in life.

What Works: Our Recommendations

As seen here, framing the conversation around *what all teenagers need* was also an effective way to address the issue of harsh punishment for young men of color. Audiences believe that all teenagers make mistakes and should have the opportunity to learn from them. We should not treat young men of color differently or deny them the same opportunity to learn from mistakes as other teens.

This approach worked well for audiences of color as much as it did for white audiences. When we focused solely on young men of color, we received pushback from people of color that we shouldn't single out one type of teenager over another.

Other examples of statements that expressed universal beliefs about what *all* young people need and that garnered very strong audience support include:

Audiences AGREE or STRONGLY agree with these statements:

If young people do not have the basics—like food or a safe place to live or a loving family—they have a harder time learning in school. They are more likely to fall behind or act out in class, or even drop out altogether.

83%

Teenagers who make mistakes that land them in juvenile court can still be redeemed. If they are willing to take responsibility for their actions, we should go the extra mile to help them finish school and find opportunities for work.

82%

We need to teach teenagers how to be accountable so that they grow into responsible adults.

77%

All young people should have a caring adult in their life. When parents can't be there, teachers, coaches and mentors can make a big difference.

75%

All young people should have the opportunity to make healthy choices and have the tools to lead a healthy life. We should strive to build a Culture of Health in every community.

74%

2: Show, Don't Tell

When your goal is to change hearts and minds, it is essential to illustrate your case rather than argue your point. In other words: *Show. Don't tell.*

Showing enables the reader to experience a story through action, words, thoughts, senses, and feelings rather than through simple summarization and description.

As we discussed earlier, many Americans do not believe racism exists and have strong biases about young men of color. One way to disrupt that mindset is to help our audiences experience, at least in their minds and hearts, what it is like to be a young man of color—or to be a parent, teacher, or mentor trying to help young men of color succeed.

The following is an example of one fictitious story that enabled our audiences to root for young men of color rather than cast judgment on them.

Brother to Brother



"My dad left my mom and me when I was 6. By 7th grade I was skipping class. I was always getting in trouble for being late and talking back. After talking to my mom, my principal helped me enroll in a therapy group for young men like me. We talked about everything. We did our homework together. We became like brothers. They gave me the support I needed to get on the right track."

After three years as a participant and mentor in the Brother to Brother, DeShaun Peters graduated from high school last spring. He is now enrolled in community college and is working toward a teaching degree.

What Works: Our Recommendations

We also found that providing specific facts about the barriers young men of color face helped our audiences picture and empathize with their struggle more. Concrete facts about racial disparities were more likely to prompt action than data that focused more generally on “discrimination.” Facts help demonstrate scale and impact and should be used as supporting evidence for your messages and stories. The following are some facts we found particularly effective to use:

Audiences rated these statements as **CONVINCING** reasons to support programs for young men of color:

Many young men of color struggle because they don't have fathers or other positive male role models in their lives.

69%

Young men of color are more likely to drop out of school than any other group of Americans and end up underemployed, reliant on government assistance, and facing a lifetime of health problems as a result.

68%

Many young men of color witnessed violence or experienced abuse when they were young children. If we respond with punishment rather than treatment, it only makes things worse.

65%

Young men of color are five times more likely than average Americans to have a parent in prison.

65%



3: Tell Solution Stories

At the beginning of every focus group, we asked participants to show us on a scale how hopeful they were that we could make a difference in the lives of young men of color. To track progress, at the end of each session, we asked them the same question again. The majority of participants moved in the direction of being more hopeful than they were in the beginning. When we asked them why, the most common answer was that they had become more aware of promising solutions.

"In the beginning it seemed hopeless, but after hearing about the programs, it made me feel better and gave me hope for the young men out there struggling."

—Black female participant, California, age 53

Solution stories work best when they:

Include contextual information about why the solution is needed. For example, talk about how many young men of color drop out of school before introducing a solution that helps young men stay in school.

Paint a picture of how the solution actually works. Give specific examples rather than leaning on generalities. Use active everyday language that people can understand, like counseling, mentoring, job training, coaching, and tutoring.

Include a story about a person whose life changed for the better as a result of the solution. People want to root for characters who are trying to overcome hardship. Focusing on one person's story to illustrate a solution captures the audience's imagination and keeps them interested in the program.

Include other participants (teachers, judges, parents, pastors, mentors) who contribute to the solution and are helping that young man succeed. We also found it especially effective to include adults who overcame challenges in their own lives and were now helping other young men to succeed.

Provide concrete data or results to show that the solution works. We also found that it was much more effective to show the key results of the program instead of simply telling the audience that the solution was proven or was the right approach.

What Works: Our Recommendations

In addition to the “Brother to Brother” fictitious example mentioned, the following fictitious solution stories were particularly effective:

Rites of Passage



Being a teenager is hard—especially if you don’t have family support or enough good role models. Having adult mentors who can guide you helps.

Cavalry Community Church created Rites of Passage to help young men set and achieve personal goals and get mentoring to overcome the challenges of young adulthood. Nine of our 10 program graduates are working full time or are enrolled in college.

“We have faith that every young man can reach his personal potential. We let them know they don’t have to do it alone.”

—Cedric Washington, Rites of Passage mentor

EMS Corps



Four years ago, Joaquin Gutierrez was in juvenile detention without much hope for a future. Now he saves lives as a Paramedics Plus EMT. Gutierrez is the product of EMS Corps, which gives motivated young men having few career options the skills and experience for a job in emergency medicine. Members of EMS Corps get classroom training, job experience, mentoring and job placement.

“The EMS Corps graduates we have hired are outstanding. They work hard, love helping people, and know the community better than anyone. I wish I could hire a lot more of them.”

—Wellington Smith, Paramedics Plus district supervisor



It's important to note that not every solution story you share has to be a novel. A “micro-story,” which can be as short as a single sentence, is a message or talking point that embodies some of the attributes of stories, including the ability to elicit empathy from the audience.

Fictitious Sample Micro-Stories:

Four years ago, Joaquin Gutierrez was in juvenile detention without much hope. Now he's saving lives as a Paramedics Plus EMT.

Garrett Jackson used to fight with everyone. After repeated incidents, he was sent to juvenile detention. Now, thanks to the Gateways Program, he's back in school and on track to graduate this spring.

4: Use Values-Based Words and Messages

Messages based on shared values serve two functions. First, they help to facilitate a sense of shared identity (“Oh, you're like me!”), which is an important precursor to empathy. Second, they help to regulate the big negative emotions, like fear and anxiety, which flood our brains whenever we find ourselves in a conversation about something controversial.

When an audience considers an issue that is emotionally complex or controversial, their brains are often flooded with negative emotional noise that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to “hear” the substance of the message, no matter how well-crafted. By appealing to shared human values, we can create a sense of familiarity that helps to calm that negative emotional noise.

What Works: Our Recommendations

Human beings regularly make moral decisions about the world. Their personal values guide their moral attitudes and actions. When our messages reflect our audience's shared values, we place our cause on the same side as their own moral beliefs. **Our research demonstrated that these *five values* are effective when talking about young men of color:**

FAMILY

Family as a value transcends all cultures and geographies in the United States. Most people believe that family plays the biggest role in raising young people to be productive citizens.

In our focus groups, when we failed to acknowledge the importance of family up front, participants rejected our messages out of concern that we were letting families off the hook. Audiences were more receptive when we gave a nod to the important role of parents before talking about what happens to young men when families can't be there for them.

"It is a truth that the support of family is necessary and just creating programs is not going to help."

–Asian female focus group participant

"A lot of problems can be solved. It starts with the community, and first of all, the family. The parents need to step in. Don't let someone else try to parent your child."

–Black male focus group participant

The following are recommended ways to introduce the value of family early in the conversation:

- Any parent can tell you that teenage years are hard.
- Being a teenager is hard, especially if you don't have family support or enough good role models.
- When it comes to raising kids, nothing is more important than family. No parent can be everywhere, but it's especially hard for parents working two jobs or more to make ends meet.
- Every young person should have a caring adult in his or her life. When parents can't be there, teachers, coaches and mentors can make a big difference.

RESPONSIBILITY

Responsibility is one of the most universal values in the United States and around the world. When it comes to raising children, there is a widespread belief that parents, schools, and others should be teaching young people to be responsible. People often support harsh discipline practices because they believe—often wrongly—it is an effective way to teach responsibility. When we leave responsibility out of the conversation, our audiences immediately start to become skeptical.

“I think the words that come to my mind are accountability, right and wrong, consequence, mentoring. I want to walk away thinking we used to have that. We used to have all of those things and somehow those things have fallen by the wayside and I think that is why you have to have so many different solutions because we don’t do that anymore. There is no consequence or accountability...”

—*Latino male focus group participant*

The truth is there are better ways to teach responsibility than harsh discipline. Rather than concede such an important value as responsibility (or its close cousin, *accountability*), we should instead claim it as one of our core values.

Sample messages that incorporate the value of responsibility:

- Teenagers who make mistakes that land them in juvenile court can still be redeemed. If they are willing to take responsibility for their actions, we should go the extra mile to help them finish school and find opportunities for work.
- We need to teach teenagers how to be accountable so that they grow into responsible adults.
- Every community has mentors and coaches who know how to get through to young men, teach them accountability, and build their character.
- When young men cross the line, schools should hold them accountable—while keeping them in school.
- Our coaches work with young people until they are off probation and are on a solid path to self-sufficiency.

SECOND CHANCES

One of the great beliefs about the United States is that it is the land of second chances. Americans want to believe in the power of redemption. Our focus group participants consistently showed a belief that people who make mistakes should be forgiven and given another chance, *if* they show remorse and make amends.

“You have to work to be accepted again for a wrong and you have to learn that actions involve consequences and once you get that—that is part of the learning process thing. Once a person can make the amends, I think the bridge has been built a lot stronger back into the community.”

—Anglo male focus group participant

We also found broad support for the notion that all teenagers make mistakes and should be given an opportunity to learn from mistakes and do better. The value of second chances can be especially strategic for talking about programs and campaigns dealing with school discipline or the juvenile justice system.

“Sometimes [young men] do something bad, and they end up in court. It is just extreme. I really like the idea of giving them a warning first, and then if that didn't sink in then they take the next step.”

—Latina female focus group participant

Examples of messages that speak to the value of second chances:

- Kids make mistakes and it's our job as adults to help them learn from their mistakes. More often than not, when we give them the chance and support, they respond.
- Making mistakes—and learning from them—is part of growing up.
- Teenagers who make mistakes that land them in juvenile court can still be redeemed. If they are willing to take responsibility for their actions, we should go the extra mile to help them finish school and find opportunities for work.

What Works: Our Recommendations

SCHOOL

One of the most widely held American beliefs is the idea that education is the foundation for a young person's success. The messages we tested were more effective when they identified barriers or opportunities to succeed in school. For example, audiences were especially concerned that young men of color faced high dropout rates. They strongly embraced solutions that could be shown to help more young men stay in school and graduate.

"It is a pattern. It is like teaching your kids to do the right thing when they're little. If you teach them that, then they are going to do the right thing when they are in middle school and they are going to do the right thing when they're in high school, and they are going to do the right thing when they go to college and get a job."

—Latino male focus group participant

The following are some examples of effective messages that speak to the value of school:

- Young men of color are more likely to drop out of school than any other group of Americans. As a result, they are more likely to end up underemployed, reliant on government assistance, and facing a lifetime of health problems.
- This program works to keep kids in school and out of the courtroom.
- As a result of this program, school suspensions are way down and graduation rates are way up.



What Works: Our Recommendations

OPPORTUNITIES, TOOLS TO SUCCEED

Most Americans believe that the best way to help people in need is with a hand up, not a handout, and that you can't help people who are not willing to help themselves. This strong public bias in favor of personal responsibility can make it hard to address the need for collective action.

We can, however, talk about giving everyone *an opportunity* or a *chance* to succeed and about providing young people the *tools* or *skills* to navigate school and life. These subtle words and phrases make it possible to speak in ambitious, universal, and even collective terms without sounding unrealistic or undermining the notion of personal responsibility.

Messages we tested that can help neutralize the personal responsibility argument include:

- All young people should have the opportunity to make healthy choices and have the tools to lead a healthy life. We should strive to build a Culture of Health in every community.
- If we teach our young men the skills to be resilient as teenagers, they will have a much better chance of succeeding in life.
- We should support programs that teach teenage boys how to be leaders and give them opportunities to serve their community.

5: Deploy Trusted Messengers

When it comes to persuasion, we found, the messenger matters as much as the message. The messenger signals to the audience whether the information they are receiving is coming from a trusted source.

We found the following groups of messengers to be particularly effective in building support for young men of color:

- **Adult men of color** who came from the same community and who had to overcome the same personal barriers. This works even better when the messenger is also giving back to the community to help more young men succeed.
- **White messengers** who can model acceptance, empathy and understanding for young men of color in our society. It could be a white judge or police officer who cares about keeping young men out of the juvenile justice system, or an educator working to keep more young men in school. It is also helpful to have a business leader talk about how our economy will benefit if more young men have a path to a good job.
- **Young people** who are working hard for a better future despite the odds. Audiences want to see young men succeed and rally behind those who are making the effort, even if it is clear that the struggle will be hard.

Messages That Lack Broad Appeal

Changing demographics

Many advocates try to make the case that our nation should care about young people of color because the nation is approaching a time when men of color will be in the majority. While this messaging may work for elected officials or business owners, our research suggests that it is not effective with the general public. The demographics frame tends to make white people anxious about the fact that the nation is changing and that they may be “left behind.” It also does not resonate well with people of color who feel a disconnect between any would-be majority status and their own personal experiences of discrimination.

Talking about structural/institutional racism

Most of us within the field are well-versed on the institutional and structural systems that have created and perpetuate racism. We are equipped to discuss racism and young men of color within a structural framework and want the public to understand that racism is not about how people feel about people of color, but how systems, institutions, and society at large actually perpetuate the challenges that young men of color face.

As we discussed earlier, it’s hard for the average American to talk about race. That is doubly true of structural or institutional racism because the average American does not view the world in terms of systems. If we want to address systematic problems or dismantle structures, we have to talk about the changes we want to make in *very human terms*. We need to talk about the people in those systems—teachers, principals, police officers, counselors, social workers—and the important role they play in the lives of our young people.

Still, as seen with recent events in our nation, there is a time and place for talking about the established systems that need to change. Sometimes an impactful experience shakes the national conscience, such as police brutality, and opens a new door for new conversations about structural discrimination. We should take advantage of these opportunities and use them as teachable moments. We just need to acknowledge that by framing the issue around discrimination, we may be turning people off who would otherwise be persuadable with a different type of appeal.

If you feel the need to talk directly about reforming systems to end patterns of discrimination, the single most effective way to do that is by providing positive examples of where that change has happened successfully. You will persuade more people by talking about how a school district lifted graduation rates for young men of color by ending harsh disciplinary policies. Or how a juvenile court reduced incarceration rates by helping young men get counseling instead of putting them behind bars.

In Closing

To help ensure that all young men of color grow up to be healthy and successful, we need to enlist broad support across the nation for a wide range of policies and practices from many different sectors in our society. How we communicate about these issues will not be the only factor that matters, but it will likely determine whether the wind is in our face, or at our backs.

All too often, young men of color in our society are presented in ways that lead people to see them as unworthy of love, support, and investment. Our research tells us that a different narrative about young men of color—one that underscores a common humanity—can significantly move and change hearts and minds. Our research also suggests that change will not happen all at once. Instead, progress can beget progress, with each story of transformation inspiring the support that is needed to make the next success story possible.

Whether you are living these stories or telling them, you can have immeasurable impact on the future of our young men, and on our nation as a whole.

References

- Correll, J., Park, B., Judd, C., et al. 2002. The police officer's dilemma: Using ethnicity to disambiguate potentially threatening individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 6:1314–1329. doi: 10.1037//0022-3514.83.6.1314.
- Jones, R., Cox, D., & Navarro-Rivera, J. 2013. In search of libertarians in America. *Public Religion Research Institute*, October 29. http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/2013.AVS_WEB.pdf
- Moore, P. 2015. Whites, blacks divided on whether we talk about race too much or not enough. *YouGov*, March 18. <https://today.yougov.com/news/2015/03/18/whites-blacks-divided-whether-we-talk>
- Norton, M. and Sommers, S. 2011. Whites see racism as a zero-sum game that they are now losing. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. 6:215. doi: 10.1177/1745691611406922.
- Nosek, B.A., Mahzarin B., & Greenwald, A.G. 2002. Harvesting implicit group attitudes and beliefs from a demonstration web site. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*. 6:101–115.
- Rutland, A., Cameron, L., Milne, A., et al. 2005. Social norms and self-presentation: Children's implicit and explicit intergroup attitudes. *Child Development*. 76:451–466.
www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15784093
- Trent, S. 2015. We can talk about race without fighting or getting defensive, if we're willing to learn how. *The Washington Post*, May 18. www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/03/09/why-americans-fear-talking-about-race-and-how-you-can-lead-the-way

ABOUT THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

For more than 40 years the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has worked to improve health and health care. We are striving to build a national Culture of Health that will enable all to live longer, healthier lives now and for generations to come. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org. Follow the Foundation on Twitter at www.rwjf.org/twitter or on Facebook at www.rwjf.org/facebook.



Robert Wood Johnson
Foundation

Route 1 and College Road East
P.O. Box 2316
Princeton, NJ 08543-2316