SECTION 1- INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH

The Challenges Youth Face Today

This introduction outlines a variety of risks and challenges that our youth face today based on published research. In light of this research, we not only describe the challenges that our youth face but identify the pressing need for tailored approaches and solutions that can help to mitigate these challenges, specifically in the areas of mental health, negative cultural and social norms, changing social dynamics and exposure to violence- particularly human trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). The Project ROOTS toolkit aims to address these pressing issues through building the coping skills of our youth through gender perspective, to build their resilience and prevent them from becoming victims of these risks.

Mental Health Concerns

It is difficult to exercise a conscientious, mindful state when living in a societal context that instructs us to act oppositely, particularly for boys. Boys and girls alike, we want to our youth to feel self-confident and overcome the social pressures that may lead to poor mental health outcomes. A few of the mental health concerns our youth face include depression, anxiety and suicide.

Depression and Anxiety

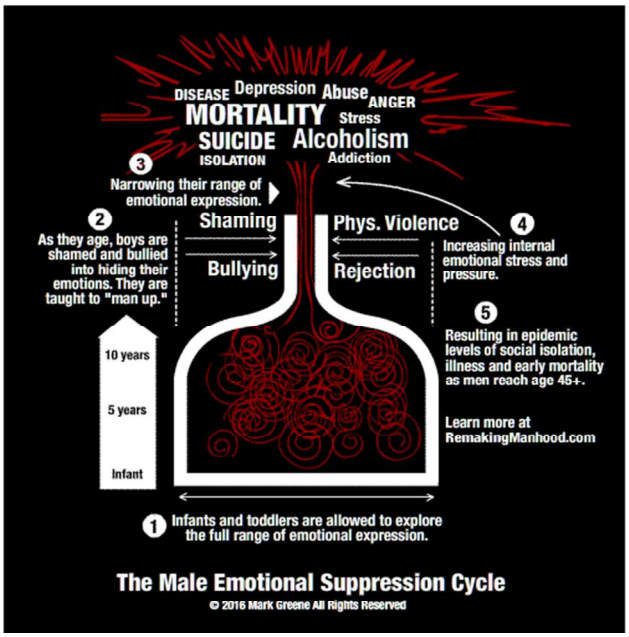
"Depression is a common but serious mood disorder that affects how one feels, thinks, and handles daily activities…research suggests that it is caused by a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors."[35] Like adults, youth are susceptible to the symptoms of depression due to their personal hardships and/or the repression of their emotions. Many youth also experience various types of anxiety, from separation and social anxiety to obsessive compulsive and post-traumatic stress disorders. "Anxiety is a normal adaptive system that lets the body know when it's in danger. But anxiety becomes a problem when it's out of proportion to the situation and interferes with a person's ability to function."[36]

Depression and anxiety occur in youth and adolescents of all genders. However, some research suggests it is more prevalent in females. "Before puberty, the prevalence of mood disorders is about the same in boys and girls—3 to 5 percent. But by mid-adolescence girls are more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with a mood disorder as boys, with the prevalence at adult levels, 14 to 20 percent."[37] There are varying theories on why girls may experience more depression and anxiety than males. No matter the cause, whether it is hardwired or environmental, it is imperative that the caring adults around the

[35] Depression. (2018, February). Retrieved from https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression/index.shtml
[36] Pietro, Sal. "Mood Disorders and Teenage Girls." Child Mind Institute, Child Mind Institute, 5 Oct. 2018, childmind.org/article/mood-disorders-and-teenage-girls/.
[37] Pietro, Sal. "Mood Disorders and Teenage Girls." Child Mind Institute, Child Mind Institute, 5 Oct. 2018, childmind.org/article/mood-disorders-and-teenage-girls/.

disturbed youth can detect the signs early (withdrawal, continuous change in mood- sadness and irritability, change in behavior) and refer the child to the appropriate therapeutic services.

Boys on the other hand, who may also suffer from depression and anxiety, are more likely to suppress their emotions. "Masculinity is an important predictor of mental health because gender roles strongly influence how males learn to express themselves. The lack of ability for males to express themselves contributes to health issues such as depression, boredom, feeling socially isolated, and other mental health problems."[38] Furthermore, boys may have a sense of *stoicism*, or the denial, suppression, control of emotions, lack of emotional involvement, dislike of free emotional expression, and ability to endure emotion.[39] As one of the critical features of *toxic masculinity*, stoicism, over time, catalyzes into violence. "Stoicism is a facet of the stereotypical masculine gender role."[40] In order to defeat this characteristic gender role, we must create environments where boys feel that their voices are both heard and respected and they are able to express their emotions in a safe and trusted space. Family, teachers, mentors and friends are people that can provide this safe space.



Source: Greene, M. (2016, March 25). The Male Emotional Suppression Cycle [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://goodmenproject.com/megasahd/male-suppression-explained-megasahd

Suicide

According to 2016 National Institute of Health statistic, suicide was the second leading cause of death among youth between the ages of 10 and 34,[41] and suicide rates are four times higher among males than females.[42] The Child Mind Institute names some of the risks to youth suicide including a recent loss of a friend or family member, a psychiatric disorder, prior attempts at suicide, substance abuse, struggling with sexual orientation or gender identity in a non-accepting environment, bullying, lack of family support, family history of suicide, barriers to services and stigma. However, there are several protective factors that can help to offset the risk of suicide including good problem-solving skills,

[38] Basterfield, Candice, Reardon, Candice, Govender, Kaymarlin, and Litt, D. "Relationship between Constructions of Masculinity, Health Risk Behaviors and Mental Health among Adolescent High School Boys in Durban, South Africa." *International Journal of Men's Health* 13, no. 2 (2014): 101-120.
[39] Murray, Judd, Jackson, Fraser, Komiti, Pattison, Wearing, and Robins. "Big Boys Don't Cry: An Investigation of Stoicism and Its Mental Health Outcomes." *Personality and Individual Differences* 44, no. 6 (2008): 1369-381.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] "Suicide." *National Institute of Mental Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml.
[42] Ramchand, Rajeev and Amariah Becker, Suicide Rates in California: Trends and Implications for Prevention and Early Intervention Programs. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9737.html

strong connections to family and community, cultural or religious beliefs that discourage suicide, access to services and interventions.[43] While this toolkit cannot address all of these issues, it can encourage a variety of these protective factors, including creating strong connections to school, improving problem solving skills and providing a warm handoff to psychosocial services.

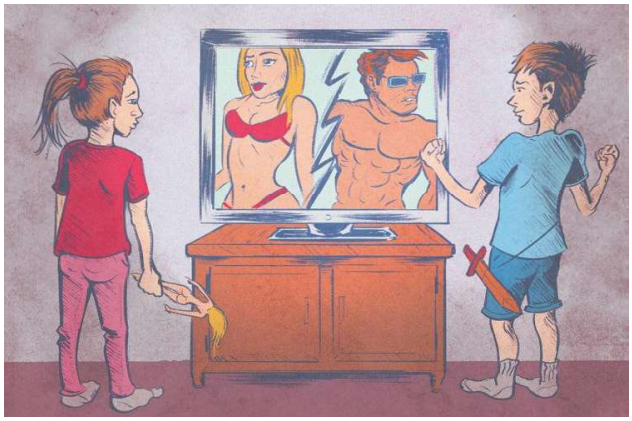
Negative Cultural and Social Norms

Beyond individual mental health concerns, today's society places a lot of pressure and expectations on our youth through the perpetuation of cultural and social norms that are negative or unhealthy and are consistently being reinforced through social and entertainment media and peer pressure. A few norms or cultural influences described in this introduction include distorted body image, toxic masculinity, social media and bullying.

Body Image

"Contemporary issues surrounding body awareness in children and adolescents have increased with several researchers suggesting the media to be a significant contributor to this phenomenon."[44] The pressures placed on children to attain the "perfect body" may be unachievable for their individual genetically-determined shape and may explain the obsessive nature that some children develop as they are so engrossed with achieving this ideal.[45] Though healthy habits are always encouraged, we recognize that every individual is physically and emotionally different. Therefore, it is important to help youth recognize and instill self-esteem. In doing so, not only can they come to embrace their bodies and gifts but can equally respect those amongst their peers. "Media literacy programs exist and have been found both positive and effective, as demonstrated by a temporary program for Australian junior high students."[46]

In an era where technology and social media alike have become so prevalent and easily-accessible, ideal body shapes and sizes have been praised across numerous platforms. "In the case of girls, a study of 6,928 girls aged 9 to 14 found that attempting to emulate the appearance of females on television, in movies, and in magazines was predictive of beginning purging behavior at least monthly and that the risk for this behavior increased with the frequency of trying to look like



Source: [Body Shaming]. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.breezejmu.org/opinion/opinion-body-shaming-of-all-types-is-too-common-in/article_1579b8a8-d565-11e7-8235-b7fec1b85570.html

[43] "Suicide." *National Institute of Mental Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml.
[44] Lawrie, Z., E. A. Sullivan, P. S. W. Davies, and R. J. Hill. "Media Influence on the Body Image of Children and Adolescents." *Eating Disorders* 14, no. 5 (2006): 355-46.
[45] *Ibid.*
[46] Andsager, Julie. "Research Directions in Social Media and Body Image." *Sex Roles* 71, no. 11 (2014): 407-13.

females in the media."[47] For girls, the internalization of a thin ideal long presented as the standard of beauty in the U.S. can result in disordered eating or over-exercising.[48]

Body shaming extends to not only girls, but their counterparts. "The ideal body size and shape for men has changed from a larger body to become more muscular with a physically fit appearance."[49] Exposure to media images that focus on men's physique has been positively correlated with body dissatisfaction.[50]

The pressure for our youth to attain the unattainable when it comes to body image or to be constantly consumed and concerned about their "imperfect" body, can lead to a lowered sense of self-confidence, self-esteem and devalued self-worth. Project ROOTS aims to expose and discredit these negative social pressures and reinforces that beauty comes from within.

Toxic Masculinity

Toxic masculinity inappropriately characterizes the male gender role as violent and emotionally suppressed. While we encourage our youth to step 'out' of the man box when it is harmful to themselves and others, we champion the notion of healthy masculinity, wherein their self-expression carries respect for the physical and emotional well-being of themselves and their peers. According to Michael Carley of The Good Men Project, "No one is saying that all masculinity or that men themselves are toxic or bad. You are free to like the things that men stereotypically like: sports, cars, the opposite sex, with no judgement. There is nothing wrong with these things. When does masculinity become toxic? When it derives from a rejection of the perceived opposite, femininity, that is so pervasive as to become unhealthy for both men and those around them."[51] Some go as far as to say that "sexual violence in the West is fundamentally a problem of masculinity, a manifestation of the phenomenon that gender studies conceptualize as "toxic masculinity"."[52]

Under the guidance of the facilitator and this toolkit, we can create a safe space where youth, particularly boys, can question and rise above the gender norms that currently define our culture. "The transformation of masculinity is required to eradicate men's violence against women and all forms of gender-based and sexual violence."[53]

Social Media

Today's generation, often called the iGen, is the first population who will never experience life before smartphones and the internet. As Jean Twenge states in her article, *Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?* "The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers' lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health. These changes have affected young people in every corner of the

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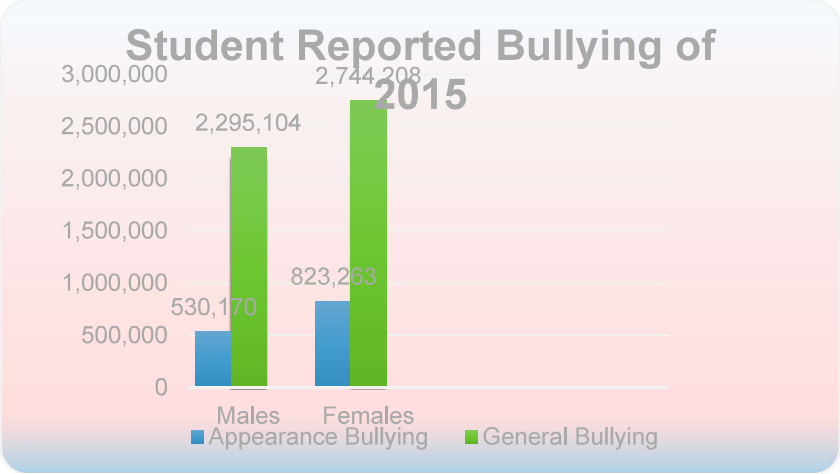
[47] Lawrie, Z., E. A. Sullivan, P. S. W. Davies, and R. J. Hill. "Media Influence on the Body Image of Children and Adolescents." *Eating Disorders* 14, no. 5 (2006): 355-64.
[48] Andsager, Julie. "Research Directions in Social Media and Body Image." *Sex Roles* 71, no. 11 (2014): 407-13.
[49] Lawrie, Z., E. A. Sullivan, P. S. W. Davies, and R. J. Hill. "Media Influence on the Body Image of Children and Adolescents." *Eating Disorders* 14, no. 5 (2006): 355-64.
[50] Andsager, Julie. "Research Directions in Social Media and Body Image." *Sex Roles* 71, no. 11 (2014): 407-13.
[51] Carley, Michael. 2018. "What is Toxic Masculinity?" The Good Men Project, April 5, 2018.
[52] "Teaching the Cause of Rape Culture: Toxic Masculinity." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33, no. 1 (2017): 177-79.
[53] "Teaching the Cause of Rape Culture: Toxic Masculinity." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 33*, no. 1 (2017): 177-79.

nation and in every type of household."[54] Based on a nationally representative survey of youth, also cited in Twenge's article, "Teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on non-screen activities are more likely to be happy. . . Eighth-graders who spend 10 or more hours a week on social media are 56 percent more likely to say they're unhappy than those who devote less time to social media."[55]

There is little doubt that this iGeneration is more likely to experience cyberbullying, have lower attention spans and have higher rates of depression and suicide, especially girls. While we cannot reverse the sudden exposure of youth to smartphones, the internet and social media, we can encourage human interaction and physical connectedness with their peers. Project ROOTS provides a space for youth to have personal interactions, learn how to cope with instances of cyberbullying and understand what relationships in "real life" look like.

Bullying

In light of the National Crime Victimization Survey of 2015, it was shown that, "20.8% (5,041,000) of students enrolled in grades 6 through 12 have reported that they have received some form of bullying (i.e. being insulted, subjected to rumors, threatened with harm, pushed, spit on, or excluded from activities)."[56] However, only 19.2% of children that are bullied in schools with gangs present are likely to report such behavior. As a result of this daily form of confrontation, students develop fear from an attack, tend to skip school and classes, avoid specific places at school, engage in physical fights and even carry weapons to school.[57] Project ROOTS creates a nonjudgmental, safe environment where youth may express and share the challenges that they face. Our activities and discussions look beyond the surface of our differences, and aim to explore the inherent values, interests, goals, and feelings that make us similar to one another. We exercise empathy in its purest form when we not only recognize the various struggles that others may be facing but extend a hand to them out of inclusivity and equality.



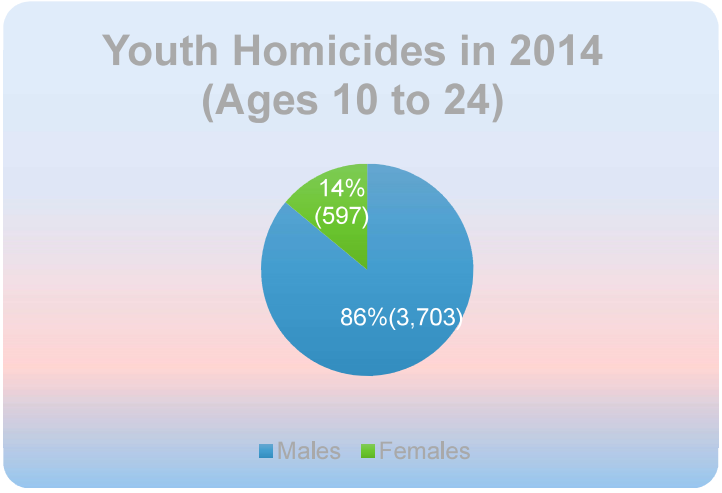
Source: United States Department of Education. *Students Reports of Bullying: Results From the 2015 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey*. NCES 2017-015. 2016. 1-51.

[54] Twenge, Jean M. "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 19 Mar. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/.
[55] Ibid.
[56] United States Department of Education. *Students Reports of Bullying: Results From the 2015 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey*. NCES 2017-015. 2016. 1-51.
[57] *Ibid.*

Exposure to Violence

Though violence can be displayed in virtually any environment. "For youth who live in economically disadvantaged communities, the street increases the chance of involvement in deviant peer relationships, personal experience with violent victimization, easy access to firearms and witnessing community violence."[58] The Center for Disease Control confirms that homicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for young people ages 10 to 24 years old.[59] However, the sources of violence that boys and girls experience are quite different. Girls tend to engage in relational aggression and may be violent when dealing with relationships such as peers, romantic partners, instigation by outsiders, or family arguments. Boys are engaging in overtly violent behaviors and instrumental aggression for personal gain of power, influence, or money.[60]

"Exposure to violence can have a profound influence on adolescent's mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress."[61] With respect to violence displayed in the greater community, some adolescents respond and display externalizing behavior, including use of violence, aggression, intent to engage in violence, and participation in gang activity.[62]



Source: Center for Disease Control, Division of Violence Prevention. (2016) Youth Violence: Facts at a Glance. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/yv-datasheet.pdf.

Gender-Based Violence

Violence Against Women poses as one of the primary manifestations of gender-based violence. "According to the United Nations, the term Violence Against Women (VAW) means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."[63] Regardless of one's gender, this form of violence is perpetuated by an underlying sense of inequality that has been normalized culturally over time. "Socio-economic factors that could render women susceptible to gender-based violence include zero economic freedom and social security, lack of education, and low socio-economic status… Factors that influence perpetrators (men) to use VAW are: lack of confidence, feel-

[58] Finigan-Carr, Nadine M, Andrea Gielen, Denise L Haynie, and Tina L Cheng. "Youth Violence: How Gender Matters in Aggression Among Urban Early Adolescents." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 31, no. 19 (2016): 3257-281.
[59] Center for Disease Control, Division of Violence Prevention. (2016) Youth Violence: Facts at a Glance. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/yv-datasheet.pdf.
[60] Finigan-Carr, Nadine M, Andrea Gielen, Denise L Haynie, and Tina L Cheng. "Youth Violence: How Gender Matters in Aggression Among Urban Early Adolescents." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 31, no. 19 (2016): 3257-281.
[61] Kelly, Sarah, Debra Anderson, Lynne Hall, Ann Peden, and Julie Cerel. "The Effects of Exposure to Gang Violence on Adolescent Boys' Mental Health." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 33, no. 2 (2012): 80-88.
[62] *Ibid.*
[63] Kalaca, Sibel, and Dundar, Pinar. "Violence against Women: The Perspective of Academic Women." *BMC Public Health* 10 (2010): 490.

ing of insignificance, inferiority complex, ego satisfaction, economic problems, lack of education, alcohol or drug abuse."[64] Research indicates that victims and perpetrators of gender-based violence alike experience hardships that result in this undesired behavior.

Human Trafficking

Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST) is legally defined as the recruitment, harboring transportation, provision, or obtaining of U.S. minors for a commercial sex act.[65] According to a study of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in New York City, "the CSEC issue mostly affects: runaway and homeless youth who trade sex as a means of survival; children who have been sexually, physically, and emotionally abused; juveniles with minimum education who are unable to find legitimate employment; and children who are vulnerable and easily controlled and manipulated by an adult looking to make a profit."[66] Youth respondents of this case study alluded to three factors that would remove them from their exploitative environments: steady employment (60.2%), education (51.4%), and stable housing (41.4%).[67]

To contrast the experiences between girls and boys, biologically female youth enter DMST between the ages of 12-14, whereas biologically male youth and transgender youth are initiated between the ages of 11-13.[68] The impact of sexual trafficking extends beyond one's early, formative years as well. A similar case study revealed that, "71% of adult women who reported sexual exploitation during adolescence reported that their exploitation continued into adulthood."[69]

Project ROOTS has been created to strengthen the capacity amongst youth to recognize systemic inequality and to challenge harmful stereotypes that can lead to gender-based violence and DMST. In doing so, not only are they engaging in healthy relationships in light of inclusivity, self-love and empowerment, but they are cultivating a perspective that embraces the dignity within every human being. "A gender perspective is not only critical to understanding some of the roots of violence but is urgently needed in terms of solutions and prevention."[70] While ROOTS cannot address all of the cultural and environmental factors that increase the risk and exposure of our youth to violence, it can provide a set of protective factors and coping skills that can help prevent future harm and can provide health alternatives for our youth in today's challenging world.

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[64] *Ibid.*
[65] O'Brien, Jennifer, Wen Li, Ashley Givens, and George Leibowitz. "Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking among Adjudicated Male Youth: Prevalence and Links to Treatment." *Children and Youth Services Review* 82 (2017): 392.
[66] Curtis, Ric, Karen Terry, Meredith Dank, Kirk Dombrowski, and Bilal Khan. "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in New York City, Volume One: The CSEC Population in New York City: Size, Characteristics, and Needs." September 2008. https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/225083.pdf
[67] *Ibid.*
[68] O'Brien, Jennifer, Wen Li, Ashley Givens, and George Leibowitz. "Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking among Adjudicated Male Youth: Prevalence and Links to Treatment." *Children and Youth Services Review* 82 (2017): 393.
[69] *Ibid.*
[70] Fleming, Paul, Sofia Gruskin, Florencia Rojo, and Shari Dworkin. "Men's Violence against Women and Men are Inter-related: Recommendations for Simultaneous Intervention." *Social Science & Medicine* 146 (2015): 249.