



Voices from The Gathering

FINDINGS FROM A SERIES OF BLACK
MALE LISTENING SESSIONS HOSTED
BY METROMORPHOSIS



Introduction

During the month of July 2020, MetroMorphosis hosted a series of virtual listening sessions dedicated to learning from the lived experiences of Black boys and men. The purpose of the sessions were to provide a safe space specifically for African American males to sit and reflect on the realities they are facing in light of recent events from discriminatory practices in law enforcement to the global pandemic and its disproportionate effect on Black lives. In addition, MetroMorphosis sought to gain their input and support for our future work focused on African American males. Across the three-day series, more than 130 attendees participated in a guided conversation led by trained facilitators distributed among 13 breakout rooms. This report offers a synthesis of the insights and feedback shared by participants as well as their recommended solutions to the challenges before us.

Procedure

MetroMorphosis performed a series of extensive outreach strategies among targeted age groups with the hope of providing every willing Black male the opportunity to share his voice. The data presented was collected by trained facilitators and scribes during each breakout room, poll surveys completed by each participant, and facilitator debriefs performed after each event. From the notes gathered, more than 30 unique topics were identified across the conversations and organized by their frequency. Once organized, we discovered these 30 topics fell into three larger themes: [Individual Response](#), [Areas of Focus](#), and [Visions of the Future](#). Our findings are presented employing these three themes.



FINDINGS

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE

AREAS OF FOCUS

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

POLLS



INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE

This theme is connected to comments around how the participants have personally begun processing and responding to these times of uncertainty and civil unrest. The responses shared highlight mental health, remaining proactive, and pursuing research. Regarding mental health, it was shared that mindfulness exercises, speaking to a counselor, and journaling have been key to adapting. Many shared their struggles with mental health, moreover, they shared that social expectations of masculinity create an additional barrier for them to express their personal trials. The remaining rely on their spiritual practice for respite. While some express fits of confusion and apathy, the vast majority of attendees express interest in community activism in response to unjust murders of Black men by law enforcement, both locally and abroad. With this new found enthusiasm comes the need of self-education. Many have employed research as a tool to properly equip their individual efforts moving forward.

***“I’m channeling my
anxiety into activism”***



AREAS OF FOCUS

The theme of focus areas speaks to areas of interest or areas of concern that, if addressed, would lead to positive life outcomes for Black boys and men. We happened to have asked this question later in our polls, but areas of narrative change, education, workforce, and equity arose naturally in conversation on a consistent basis. Attendees shared possibilities for **narrative change**, whether it was addressing mass media misrepresenting Black men or using their individual voice to combat false narratives through their social media platforms, the importance of having the ability to tell your own story was a priority to many.

“We can change the dominant narrative of what a black man is. We are not apathetic. We are not socially irresponsible.”

Narrative Change is also expressed in the work of shifting mental models by the social impact consulting firm, **FSG**. Our attendees echo the sentiments of the systems change think tank; that is, impacting a person's perception or understanding of something is the least visible but most transformative shift that could happen. Through narrative change, mental models can be shifted which leads to a more visible, substantive change like new policy, new reform, and new action.

Regarding **education**, it is critical for the group to leverage education for a more empowered and politically active citizenry. The collective voice also expressed concern on formal education and its correlation to mass incarceration deserving more attention. “If we are not looking at the impact of systems, their negative effects will continue unchecked,” one said.

Comments on the local **workforce** were raised specifically due to the rising rates of unemployment in our communities. There was little followup to this statement only that some grow concerned as to what will happen if employment continues to remain this challenging. **Equity** was not defined as receiving the same resources as everyone else, but rather receiving the resources needed to be successful. According to the groups, equity looks like representation in seats of government, representation in spheres of education, and allocation of resources for Black-Owned startups. One voice shared that a consistent supportive environment for startups would lead to more opportunity for emerging businesses, a stronger workforce and more multi-generational inheritance of businesses.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

Visions of the future are the aspirations and desires, attendees have for their community. When we asked attendees what they would need to see to know their hometown is thriving, intimations of coalition building, revitalization, and asset-based activity arose. **Coalition building** is easily the most frequently expressed topic during our discussions. Brothers young and old(er) were vocal for community organizations to not only partner more effectively, but stressed the importance of community organizations performing similar work to operate on one accord, accomplishing more together than they could alone. Additionally, many believe building the better future they want to see requires far more collaboration between disparate fields of work and sectors to yield a lasting impact.

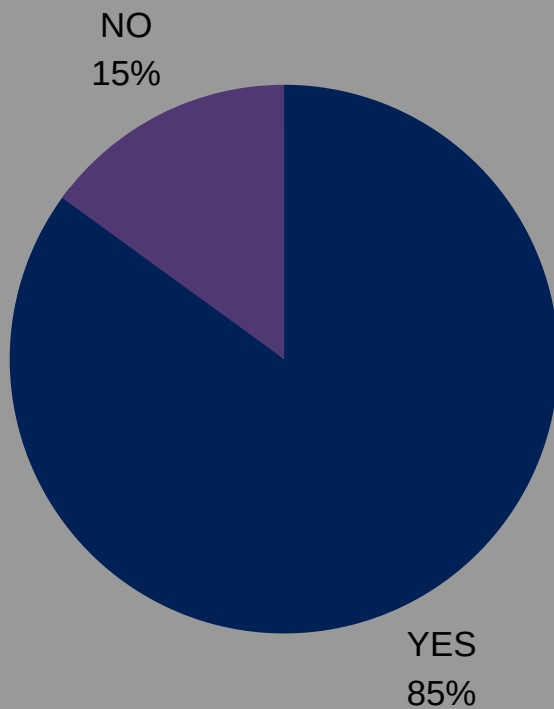
Holistic, community-led **revitalization** efforts were top of mind for many involved in the discussion. One recurring approach maintains mobilizing public institutions to create counterbalance measures against systemic disinvestment among certain communities. Another recurring voice in our conversation insists on beginning with mobilizing members of the community, creating grass-roots momentum for public institutions to join later. Both held merit but required more time than was allotted to delve deeper, what continued to be shared were creative and inspiring visions to work toward bringing to life. What rests beneath these visions of the future is the understanding and appreciation for identifying the community assets and building new work from what already exists. This **asset-based approach** is what can keep new, well-meaning efforts from reinventing the wheel.

***"Solidarity and Unity to defeat racism requires
not just a moment but a movement."***

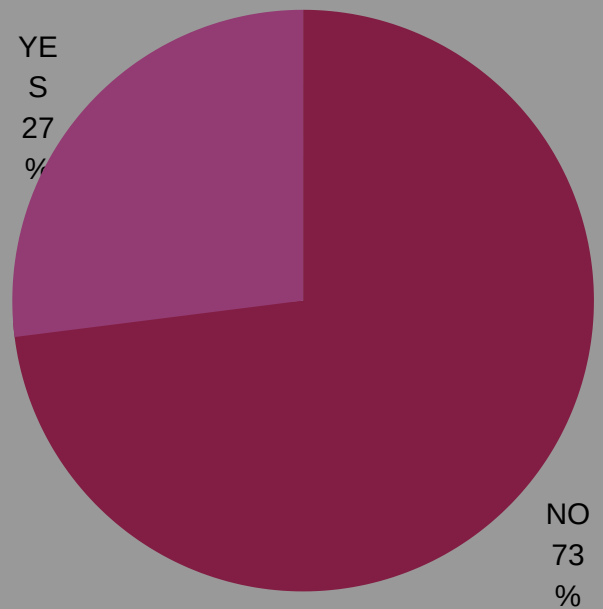
POLLS

Polling was conducted independently of breakout sessions and was designed to gather additional information about our attendees

Is there someone you know that would benefit from these organizations?

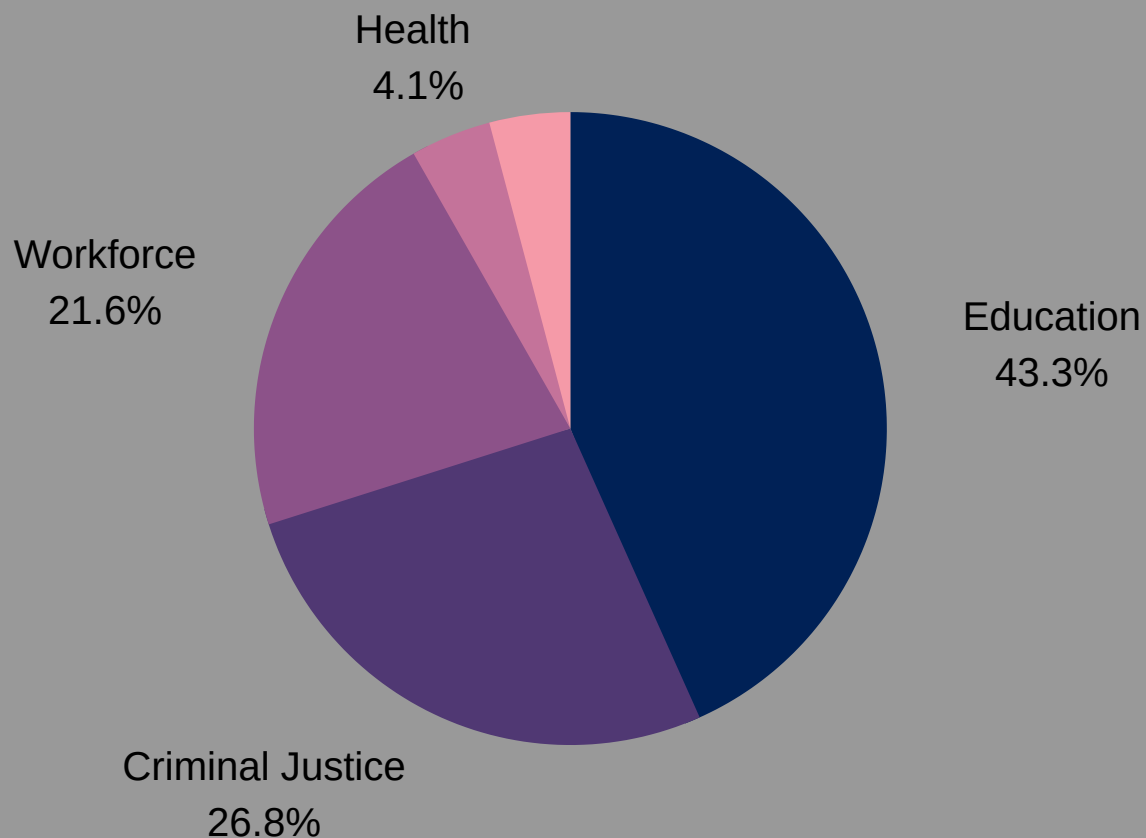


Do you personally know someone that has already benefited from these organizations?



POLLS

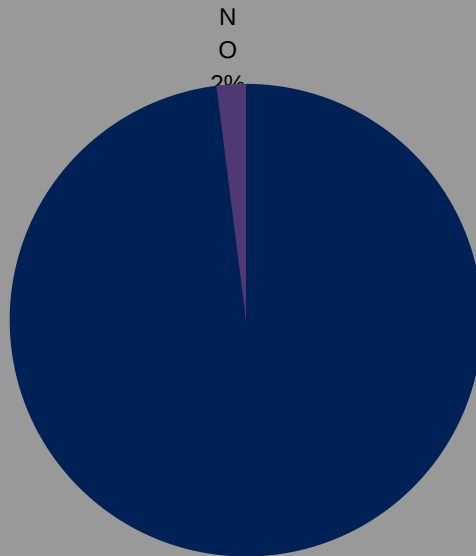
State your most important area of concern in the black boys & men space you believe we should focus?



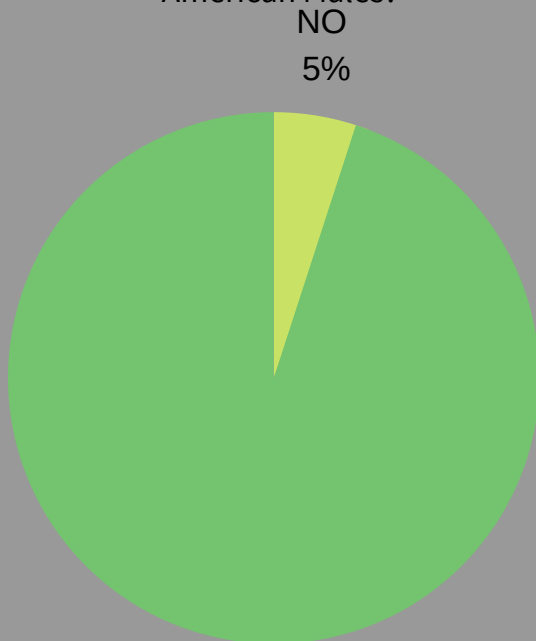
*Similar to the areas of focus during conversation listed above, the primary area of concern, however becomes Education when participants relegated to options. Narrative Change remains the largest focus area overall.

POLLS

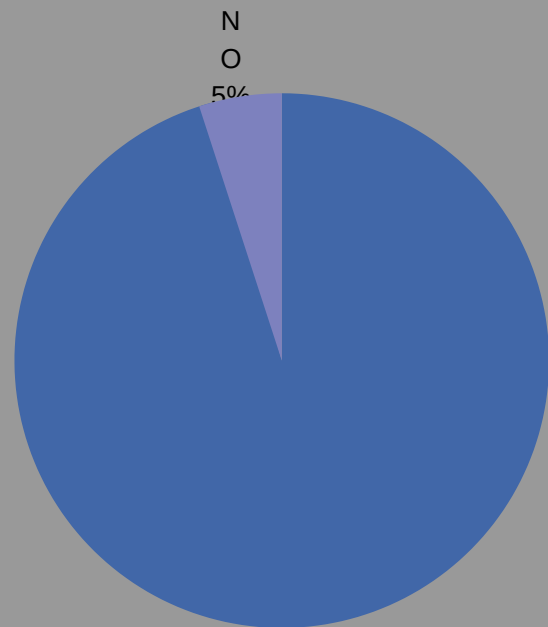
Do you feel you had an opportunity to express your thoughts and have been heard?



Do you feel a sense of having had an opportunity to reflect with other African American Males?



Would you like to remain involved in the work as it relates to Black Boys & Men?



YES
95%

YES
95%

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What does the data tell us?

Data shows participants want to see and be a part of an asset-based, collective action strategy to remedy systemic & structural challenges for Black boys and men. What it also shows is that many participants are not fully convinced a similar effort already exists. What this means is there is still much work to do, work towards more substantive collaborative efforts between community stakeholders, and work towards ensuring all parts of our communities are aware of and involved with existing efforts.

Expressed Needs From Black boys & men

Remedying the previously mentioned areas of concern will require tangible action on multiple fronts in Baton Rouge. An often overlooked approach to impacting these sectors is to inform interventions with the individual needs expressed by Black boys & men. Based on the insights shared during these listening sessions, there are three key needs Black boys & men desire: **safe spaces, ability to tell their own story, and knowledge transfer**. The implication of this statement may hold the largest shift of work in the Black boys and men space. Each of the three needs stated by the collective is intrinsically connected to some part of what Forward Promise calls “The Vicious Cycle of Dehumanization.” What Forward Promise posits in their 2019 report, *Disrupting Dehumanization* is to create “Village-Raising” strategies targeted to meet the expressed needs of Black boys through community infrastructure. By prioritizing needs based initiatives, sustainable societal change like systems reform and narrative change can take place.

Most if not all present mentioned continuing conversations like these, but now with a more focused approach. Additionally, conversations regarding mental health were heavily a part of our time together. For many joining this conversation, this has been the only time they felt the opportunity to reflect openly. A great need to address would be consistent safe spaces for Black boys and men to receive peer-led mental wellness services. Its impact would yield great benefit and solidarity between Black men. Ability to tell one's own story is in the same vein as **narrative change**. According to our attendees, the most influential and trusted sources in media providing depictions of Black boys and men are rarely operated by Black boys and men. Participants desire to be involved in the dominant narrative when they are being portrayed. Accurate representation matters and many involved in The Gathering believe Black men can do a better job depicting themselves than the current offerings. **Knowledge transfer** is described as access to the best practices in effectively navigating the world and their place in it. Having a connection with others possessing lived experience forms an understanding rarely achieved in academic settings. Our belief is if initiatives work toward addressing the needs of their constituents, there will be change in the sectors we seek to impact.

Areas of Focus for Black boys & men

While we appreciate the areas of focus detailed by the attendees, we are also aware of what is required for the change they seek. Each sector is supported by its own complex system of policies and practices. Lasting, impactful change requires a collaborative, strategic effort compelling enough to yield a desired outcome. This would require identifying key stakeholders in the chosen focus area, understanding systemic barriers at play, and crafting a shared vision that can be measured by all partners involved in the effort.

What will be the role of MetroMorphosis?

MetroMorphosis has been engaged in disrupting dehumanization by shaping and sharing positive narratives of black boys and men in Baton Rouge and leading an asset-based movement for change for several years now, but it was helpful – and necessary -- to listen to the subject matter experts about their lived experience.

After much consideration and thoughtful deliberation on our findings, MetroMorphosis has decided to embrace the My Brother's Keeper Alliance (MBK) as the asset based, collective action strategy to impact the lives of Black boys and men in Baton Rouge and disrupt practices of dehumanization. Utilizing the MBK framework affords us access to evidence-based milestones yielding systemic impact as well as a national network of MBK communities sharing best practices. By no means, however, are we abandoning our existing work with The Urban Congress on African Males. The Urban Congress will operate in a complimentary advisory capacity to MBK and will remain an integral component to our efforts.

It is the hope of MetroMorphosis that the conversations from these listening sessions and those that emerge in the coming weeks and months are an important launching point for more focused efforts to eliminate systemic barriers impacting African American males in our city, rather than simply to treat their consequences.
