

Dear white Portland ...

Racial injustice in the City of Roses, from the perspectives of young black men who live here

BY EMILY GREEN
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Before sharing the mic with the nine young men seated with him at the table, moderator and Multnomah County employee Kory Murphy solemnly listed off statistics illustrating the challenges they face as black youths in the United States.

"Homicide is the leading cause of death for African-American males between ages 10 and 24," he said. "How many of you are between the ages of 10 and 24?" Hands around the table raised. They all were.

Murphy went on, "If the current trend continues, 1 in 3 young African-American men will serve time in prison." He then counted around the table, slowly shifting his gaze and motioning toward each of the young men with his hand. "One, two, three. ... One, two, three. ... One, two, three.

"We could go on, and on, and on about the incredibly bleak current reality of young black males in our country."

The men were situated in the center of a conference room on the third floor of the Portland Marriott City Center hotel downtown. It was Oct. 14, the first day the National League of Cities Black Male Achievement Initiative symposium.

A couple dozen black leaders from across the country surrounded the young men, waiting to hear straight from the mouths of the demographic they were focused on lifting up. Representatives from cities participating in the Black Male Achievement Initiative had gathered in Portland to discuss ideas, programs and policies aimed at changing the grim statistics facing these youths.

Portland was selected as one of 11 cities to take part in Phase I of the initiative, which kicked off in January. National organizers hope to have 500 cities signed up by 2025. So far, 76 mayors are on board.

Among the young men at the table were four youths from Portland and five others hailing from Florida, Virginia, Indiana, Nebraska and Wisconsin.

The Portland men were four of eight graduates from a Summer Youth Experience program put on by the city, Multnomah County, Black Male Achievement Initiative and Worksystems Inc. The program included college internships and emotional intelligence-building workshops and culminated in a Summer Youth Summit in September, where the men facilitated discussions among their peers, discussing the relationship between race and economics, education and the justice system.

What follows are excerpts from the responses these four young Portland men gave during the roundtable discussion and during a Street Roots-led question-and-answer session immediately following the event.

Question: Given the statistics and what



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Joshua Davis shares what he learned from leading discussions about race and economics with his peers at the Summer Youth Summit. He's joined on stage at the Summer Youth Experience graduation in September by fellow graduates Malik Farrakhan and Stephon Hartley.

you know about the situation of young black males, in your opinion, how does race and racism play a role?

Stephon Hartley, 19: I was that one black kid in a classroom full of white kids. Me and my peers have been talking a lot about building relationships with teachers and how that impacts the way students will learn. A lot of the white teachers – because I was the only black kid – were very standoffish. They didn't always rush to help me. The school actually had to call my mother and tell her that they thought I was retarded – and I was in kindergarten passing second-grade tests.

Or, it's Black History Month, and you're learning about black history. Everybody's giving their take on it, then they look to you to give your African-American take on it. That's happened to me multiple times. It's the same take you guys have. I may feel stronger, but everything is wrong. Why do I have to have a different take?

Then there's being an African-American male and having that perception of danger, or whatever, in most white people – that does stop that level of relationship to be built with students and teachers. I know it affects a lot of kids.

"Everybody wants to think they control themselves, but pretty much what people tell you you are, if you hear it enough, you believe it. We hear people say we're at risk; we start to believe it."

JOSHUA DAVIS, 19

Q: We have a black president, though. Racism – is it real still?

Joshua Davis, 19: I was pretty young when Obama was elected, and I wasn't really paying attention to a lot of issues before that, but I feel like because we have a black president, in some ways, even though it's made things better, in other ways, it's made things a little bit worse. It's a lot easier to deny it now, because we have come so far. We came from slavery, and now the head of our nation is black. But it doesn't change city to city, state to state, all

the issues that have been going on since the 1800s, and back before that. All the issues – all the Black Lives Matter, it seems like when you bring it up with people, a lot of times, there's a lot of anger on both sides. You hear people say that exact thing, "We have a black president." And to me it's like, so what? It doesn't do much for people in real life.

Q: When you turn on the TV, or you watch a video on your phones, of multiple black males being gunned down, regardless of what they did, how do you feel?

Wesley Black, 21: It rains a lot in Portland, so I often wear a sweatshirt. I used to live across the street from my job, which was at the Dollar Tree, and I would work the night shift, so I'm walking home, in the dark, probably when it's raining. I remember specifically they said in the Trayvon (Martin) case, that he was looking suspiciously in other people's cars. The time it takes me to walk home, I probably look in, like, 20-some cars. Some are empty, some are not, but still I look in the car. I remember this one night, I looked into a car, and I thought, I'm it – I am Trayvon. Somebody from neighborhood watch just saw me look in this car and thinks I'm going to rob them, then I'm going to turn the block and get shot by a bunch of cops.

Hartley: A common thing that I see with my peers, the millennials, is that we support things that support racism, like WorldStar. (WorldStarHipHop is an aggregate video site known for posting videos of violent street fights.) All WorldStar is, is an outlet for racist people to get on there and bash blacks. But if you look at most of our phones, we'll have the WorldStar app. We'll be on it 24/7, supporting racism. So I just want to say we should pay more attention to the things we do and the things we support.