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American Paradox: Young Black Men

Renford Reese

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Over a half-century since Ralph Ellison wrote the classic book Invisible Man, black men have been trying to become visible. In various ways, black men have sought to get the attention of the world. An intense quest to become seen, heard, and felt has manifested itself in rebellious and counterproductive behavior. Whether it is the baggy pants, the bandana, the braids in the hair, the earring, or the tattoo, black men have desperately striven for visibility. Perpetual gang warfare and an overemphasis on living a glamorous lifestyle have derailed many young black men from achieving success in the U.S.

Author Renford Reese examines how young African American males have unwittingly accepted one model of black masculinity. The acceptance of this "tough guy" model is having detrimental consequences on an entire generation of young black men. The book's thesis is supported by a survey the author conducted of 756 African American males from the ages of 13-19 in Los Angeles and Atlanta. This survey attempts to gauge the attitudes, perceptions, and basic knowledge of young African American men regarding black public figures. One component of this survey is a Realness Scale that the author constructed. Along with this survey, interviews were conducted with various young black males to find out why they, or many of their peers, have embraced the gangsta-thug persona. The results of the survey and interviews are fascinating.

Although the primary focus of this book is on the young black male's acceptance of the gangsta-thug image and their enthusiastic embrace of society's stereotypes, this book also looks at the unkindness of the system. One would be naive to dismiss the historical impact of discriminatory policies and the systemic perpetuation of stereotypes in U.S. society. Hence, this book examines the internal and external influences on the current black male identity.

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