

FACT SHEET

About the Organizations:

RCNO

Regional Congregations and Neighborhood Organizations Training Center is a national intermediary that strengthens and connects congregations and community organizations throughout the United States. RCNO Training Center specifically focuses on building the capacity of clergy, laity and community leaders in small and mid-size African American congregations and community organizations to engage in public policy initiatives that lead to program innovations and stronger communities. By conducting training on faith-based community organizing tactics, teaching advocacy skills, helping congregations develop programs, and sharing strategies for changing public policy, RCNO creates opportunities for clergy and church-goers alike to demonstrate leadership as advocates for their families and communities. Groups affiliated with RCNO have gained national recognition for their holistic and community-centered approaches to addressing criminal justice issues, banking reinvestment, environmental justice and economic development issues. Leadership training, community organizing, empowerment, innovative programs and faith are at the core of the RCNO approach to community building and uplift.

Look University

Look University is a networking program developed by musical artist MC Hammer. Through its still evolving online network, Look University connects dedicated members of MC Hammer's fan base with each other to learn about and discuss social issues, such as the senseless violence in inner cities that has resulted in the untimely deaths of many of the nation's young people. As the first rap artist in American history to sell over 10 million albums, Hammer's pioneering career path opened doors for later hip-hop artists to achieve mainstream recognition, endorsement deals and financial success. While he remains a strong supporter of hip-hop as an art form, MC Hammer has grown increasingly concerned about the need to create a paradigm shift in hip-hop. He created Look University as a venue for expressing concerns about social problems and developing strategies for addressing them through music, popular culture and community programs. Hammer continues to contribute to the music industry as the president of the FullBlast Digital Music Group.

Program Description:

RCNO is partnering with Look University to conduct a multi-faceted national campaign focused on urban youth. Specifically, the RCNO/Look University Youth Violence Prevention Initiative aims to create a paradigm shift in the popular music industry and also in popular culture by producing and promoting socially responsible lyrical content and music videos that do not glorify drug dealing, violence and nihilism, but instead address social issues many inner-city young people confront. By using music and videos as an entry point, RCNO and Look University intend to develop a new base of informed, socially conscious, young change agents.

About the Issue:

Hip-hop was created three decades ago by African American urban youth, but has grown into a global economic and cultural force that speaks to young people across boundaries of race and income. Rap music is the element of hi-hop that has sparked the most passion and controversy.

Many rap artists and their fans see rappers as cultural and political reporters who provide unvarnished coverage of the violence, drug dealing, and police brutality in poor black neighborhoods that would otherwise be ignored. Music videos can further amplify the impact of shocking lyrics. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that, "Music videos are self reinforcing: if viewers hear a song after having seen the video version, they immediately flash back to the visual imagery in the video."

Americans increasingly want to know why hip-hop artists don't produce more songs and videos that reject violence and hopelessness for a better future.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, since 1994, the number of Americans experiencing violent crimes has declined markedly, reaching an all-time low in 2005.¹ However, 2006 marked an interesting paradox: overall crime rates declined, while *homicides increased* in many cities.² Philadelphia, PA experienced 406 homicides in 2006, according to the Philadelphia Police Department. There were 148 homicides in Oakland, CA during the same period. Los Angeles, CA experienced 464 murders, and Washington, D.C. experienced 196 violent fatalities. Gang violence emerged as a key factor in the rise in killings.

Among all Americans, teens and young adults (aged 12-24) experience the highest rates of violent crime.³ A number of complex interrelated factors influence whether or not a young person will become a victim of violent crime, but recent research shows that community characteristics play a major role.⁴ Young people who live in distressed communities with high numbers of people living in poverty, single-parent families with children, unemployment, and households receiving public assistance are at increased risk of experiencing violence.

Recommended Strategies:

RCNO and Look University hope to transform the attitudes and aspirations of urban young people and the entertainment culture that feeds them by encouraging inner-city youth throughout the United States to reject messages glorifying violence and prison culture, and embrace a sense of their own worth and possibility. Through an 18-month education and organizing strategy, the RCNO/Look University Youth Violence Prevention Initiative will teach young people to critically analyze the media influences and economic systems that manipulate their interactions and life choices, and create new forms of music and cultural expression.

Creating Socially Responsible Messages

Through Look University, MC Hammer has already produced a suite of new hip-hop songs that address critical community issues: promoting responsible sexual practices, combating the allure of prison and creating alternatives to incarceration, and restoring neighborhood pride.

In each city where the initiative is being launched, music videos and radio-friendly remixes of Hammer's socially responsible songs will be produced using local artists selected through a city-wide talent search. Proceeds from the songs will be donated to local anti-violence activities. Each initiative city will also host a spoken word competition in which poets will be required to frame their messages around the themes of anti-violence, how to stem the flow of young people into prison, and restoring hope in inner-city neighborhoods.

¹ Violent crimes include homicide, rape, robbery and both simple and aggravated assault.

² Organized Crime Digest, "*Gang Violence Emerges in 2006 as Key Factor in Homicide Resurgence*," December 29, 2006.

³ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice programs, "*Bureau of Justice Statistics Victim Age Trends*," [www.ojp.gov/bjs/glance/vage.htm], 2005.

⁴ Snyder, Howard N., and Melissa Sickmund, "*2006 Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report*." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Empowering Youth to Lead a Social Change Campaign

In each city, young people will be trained to lead a marketing campaign that will not only spread the word about the new music songs, and videos, but will also encourage that city's local Grammy Board of Governors to nominate their songs, videos and spoken word series for a Grammy award. First, the youth will receive training in how songs and music videos are produced and marketed, in a "Music Industry 101" crash course. This process is intended to help them realize the extent to which young people serve as passive consumers of messages that are rarely designed with their best interests in mind, and how they can change their roles.

Second, they will learn how the Grammy nomination process works, and how to influence their local Grammy Board. Third, they will receive training in the specifics of conducting effective social marketing. This will include, but not be limited to: tailoring their message regarding changing the image of hip-hop, working with partners to spread their message, using media such as MySpace and other creative vehicles, tracking their effectiveness, and other tactics. The campaign component of the RCNO/Look University Youth Violence Prevention Initiative is intended to demonstrate the power that youth have to change the music and video content that influences their daily lives. The skills they will develop through this campaign to sell ideas and attitudes can be used throughout their lives to improve conditions in their communities.

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