Cultural and Psychological Challenges Facing Modern American Men

**The Modern Male Support Gap: A Generational Analysis**

**Introduction**

There is growing evidence that men and boys in the United States are facing a unique crisis in development and support. Across education, employment, and mental health, males have been **falling behind** their female peers[vox.com](https://www.vox.com/the-gray-area/390781/masculinity-scott-galloway-young-men-struggling#:~:text=There%E2%80%99s%20a%20growing%20body%20of,overdoses%20and%20deaths%20by%20suicide). The data reveal alarming trends: young men are more likely to struggle in school, to be out of the labor force, and to suffer “deaths of despair” (from suicide or overdose)[vox.com](https://www.vox.com/the-gray-area/390781/masculinity-scott-galloway-young-men-struggling#:~:text=There%E2%80%99s%20a%20growing%20body%20of,overdoses%20and%20deaths%20by%20suicide)[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20classroom%20is%20only%20one,generation%20of%20struggling%20young%20men). Observers note an **“alarming number of lonely, alienated, and disaffected young men”** in America[vox.com](https://www.vox.com/the-gray-area/390781/masculinity-scott-galloway-young-men-struggling#:~:text=The%20fact%20is%2C%20we%20have,deal%20with%20as%20a%20society). Many of these men lack clear direction, close social connections, and a sense of purpose. This report examines whether modern social structures, institutions, and cultural narratives have failed to provide young men—particularly Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X—with **clear, constructive pathways** to adulthood, leadership, and well-being. We draw on current literature, expert commentary (including insights from Jonathan Haidt and colleagues), and psychological data to understand how different generations of men are navigating identity, purpose, and health in today’s society.

**The Growing Gender Gap in Education, Work, and Well-Being**

Several key indicators point to a real and meaningful gap in how men are faring relative to women in recent decades. For example:

* **Educational Attainment:** Girls and women now outperform boys and men at nearly every level of education. An estimated 45,000 fewer boys than girls graduated high school in 2018[apnews.com](https://apnews.com/article/high-school-graduation-rate-boys-c7b8dff33221e0ded2d1369397d96455#:~:text=More%20than%2045%2C000%20fewer%20boys,available%20from%2037%20reporting%20states), and **seven out of ten high school valedictorians are female**[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20statistics%20paint%20a%20stark,profound%20social%20and%20economic%20shifts). College campuses have also “swung well past equilibrium,” with women earning about **two degrees for every one degree earned by men** in the coming years[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20statistics%20paint%20a%20stark,profound%20social%20and%20economic%20shifts). This matters because college graduates have much better economic outcomes (about double the lifetime earnings of non-graduates)[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=profound%20social%20and%20economic%20shifts). Yet young men are increasingly underrepresented in these pathways to success.
* **Labor Force Participation:** Young adult men have been dropping out of the workforce or failing to launch careers. As of 2024 only **89% of men aged 25–34 are in the labor force**, which is over 700,000 fewer young men working or seeking work than if rates had stayed at early-2000s levels[evidencebasedmentoring.org](https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/americas-boys-and-men-are-falling-behind-mentoring-can-help/#:~:text=Recent%20data%20paints%20a%20stark,of%20women). In contrast, young women’s labor participation has *risen* to 79% for that age group[evidencebasedmentoring.org](https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/americas-boys-and-men-are-falling-behind-mentoring-can-help/#:~:text=force%2C%20representing%20over%20700%2C000%20fewer,of%20women). The result is a growing class of men who are neither in school nor employed. Many are also slower to achieve financial independence – about **20% of men in their late 20s live with their parents**, significantly more than the 12% of women who do[evidencebasedmentoring.org](https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/americas-boys-and-men-are-falling-behind-mentoring-can-help/#:~:text=force%2C%20representing%20over%20700%2C000%20fewer,of%20women).
* **“Deaths of Despair” and Crime:** Men account for the vast majority of suicides, drug overdoses, and incarcerations. Young men today are **three times more likely to die of a drug overdose** and **four times more likely to die by suicide** than their female peers[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20classroom%20is%20only%20one,generation%20of%20struggling%20young%20men). They are also about **14 times more likely to be incarcerated** than young women[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20classroom%20is%20only%20one,generation%20of%20struggling%20young%20men). Overall, men make up almost three out of four “deaths of despair” (deaths by suicide or substance overdose) in the United States[evidencebasedmentoring.org](https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/americas-boys-and-men-are-falling-behind-mentoring-can-help/#:~:text=The%20challenges%20facing%20young%20men,According%20to%20the%20National%20Institute). These grim statistics underscore a crisis in male mental health and stability. (Notably, women and girls have higher reported rates of depression and anxiety, but when it comes to completed suicide and fatal overdose, men are at far higher risk[brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu/books/of-boys-and-men/#:~:text=In%20some%20ways%20the%20world,start%20school%20a%20year%20later)[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Just%20as%20video%20games%20became,on%20sitting%20still%20and%20listening).)
* **Social Isolation:** By many accounts, young men are more socially isolated than ever. One survey found **15% of men report having no close friends** – a fivefold increase from the early 1990s – compared to just 3% of men then[dads4kids.org.au](https://dads4kids.org.au/authentic-male-friendship/#:~:text=Epidemic%20dads4kids,percent%20in%20the%20early%201990s). Time-use data show that men aged 18–30 spent nearly **20% more time alone in 2023 than in 2019**[evidencebasedmentoring.org](https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/americas-boys-and-men-are-falling-behind-mentoring-can-help/#:~:text=Social%20isolation%20has%20also%20become,mental%20health%20and%20social%20development) (a spike only partly attributable to the pandemic). Many young men struggle to form relationships: over 60% of young men are currently single (far higher than the share of single young women) and nearly one in three men under 25 report no sexual or romantic intimacy in the past year[psychologytoday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-state-of-our-unions/202302/why-are-so-many-young-men-single-and-sexless#:~:text=Why%20So%20Many%20Young%20Males,year%20low%20across%20genders)[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/03/29/share-americans-not-having-sex-has-reached-record-high/#:~:text=high%20www,increase%20than%20the%208). This “friendship recession” and retreat from dating leave many young men without the social support or sense of belonging that are crucial for healthy development.

Taken together, these trends paint a stark picture of a cohort of male youth and young adults who are **adrift** compared to their female counterparts. While girls and women have made enormous progress (which is a positive development), many commentators argue that society has not adequately adjusted to **support boys and men** in this new landscape[brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu/books/of-boys-and-men/#:~:text=Boys%20and%20men%20are%20struggling,the%20same%20or%20even%20worsened)[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20cultural%20zeitgeist%20here%20must,breeds%20alienation%20among%20young%20men). As Brookings scholar Richard Reeves observes, “the lives of women have changed, while the lives of many men have remained the same or even worsened” in recent decades[brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu/books/of-boys-and-men/#:~:text=Boys%20and%20men%20are%20struggling,the%20same%20or%20even%20worsened). The following sections explore how these dynamics manifest in Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, and why modern cultural narratives and institutions may be failing to guide young men toward constructive adult roles.

**Generation X: Early Signs of a Male Malaise**

Generation X (born ~1965–1980) came of age during the 1980s and 1990s, a period of significant social and economic change. In many ways, Gen X men were the **first to experience the cracks** in the traditional male pathway, even if the crisis was not yet widely recognized. Several trends in this generation’s youth presaged the struggles that would become more visible later:

*The Rise in Adolescent Pessimism among 12th graders (1977–2019).* ***Boys (green)*** *grew steadily more pessimistic about their chances in life from the late 1970s onward, while* ***girls (orange)*** *stayed low until a sharp rise in the 2010s*[*thefp.com*](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=For%20boys%2C%20the%20pattern%20is,boys%20has%20a%20longer%20backstory)*. This indicates a long-running undercurrent of despair among young men, decades before the social media era.*

* **Family Instability and Lost Fathers:** Gen X saw a surge in single-parent households as divorce rates climbed in the 1970s–80s. The proportion of American children in single-parent families rose from about 9% in 1960 to nearly 37% by the 2010s[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=has%C2%A0disproportionately%20impacted%C2%A0young%20men,outcomes%20of%20many%20young%20males). This shift disproportionately affected boys, as **father absence hit young men especially hard**. Research shows that boys raised without their fathers have significantly worse outcomes: for example, men who grow up with their biological father are **2.5 times more likely to graduate college** and about half as likely to be incarcerated, compared to those raised by a single mother (even after controlling for other factors)[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=While%20girls%20tend%20to%20show,as%20likely%20to%20be%20incarcerated). Many Gen X boys lacked a daily male role model at home to model adult manhood, which left a void in their development.
* **Educational Frustration:** By the 1980s, girls were beginning to edge out boys in school achievement, and classrooms were not always attuned to boys’ needs. Generation X boys were among the first to be labeled as having widespread attention or behavior problems in school, often leading to higher suspension and special-education rates. Studies indicate that boys have been **twice as likely to be suspended for the same infractions as girls** in school settings[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=Anti,how%20we%20perceive%20and%20manage). Teachers (over 75% of whom are female in K-12) may have unintentionally found it harder to engage rambunctious boys[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=From%20the%20very%20start%2C%20our,and%20connect%20with%20young%20girls). At the same time, no concerted effort was made to adjust schooling to boys’ developmental pace – even though boys mature later (lagging about two years behind girls in key skills like impulse control)[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=Furthermore%2C%20we%20must%20consider%20the,junctures%20in%20their%20academic%20careers). As a result, many Gen X boys experienced academic discouragement or fell behind, sowing the seeds for the wider male underachievement that followed.
* **Economic Shifts and Erosion of the Male Provider Role:** When Gen X entered the workforce in the 1990s and 2000s, they encountered the leading edge of globalization and the decline of blue-collar jobs. Traditionally male-dominated industries (manufacturing, mining, etc.) **shrank due to automation and offshoring**, while opportunities grew in service and knowledge sectors where women often excelled[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=In%20Of%20Boys%20and%20Men%2C,away%20from%20the%20real%20world). For moderately educated men, the stable, well-paying jobs their fathers or grandfathers could rely on were becoming scarce. Jonathan Haidt notes that one structural factor behind today’s male malaise is that the economy shifted away from areas “in which male strength is a huge asset” and toward sectors “where women have some advantages”[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=In%20Of%20Boys%20and%20Men%2C,away%20from%20the%20real%20world). Many Gen X men struggled to find their footing in this new economy, feeling a loss of identity as traditional provider roles were upended. This likely contributed to rising cynicism: even as early as the late 1970s, **more teenage boys than girls felt they didn’t have a chance at a successful life**, and male pessimism climbed steadily in the ensuing decades[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=For%20boys%2C%20the%20pattern%20is,boys%20has%20a%20longer%20backstory).
* **Retreat into Isolation:** The combination of family and economic changes led some Gen X men to withdraw socially. By middle age, a disturbing trend emerged: **“deaths of despair” surged among Gen X men**, especially those without college degrees[evidencebasedmentoring.org](https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/americas-boys-and-men-are-falling-behind-mentoring-can-help/#:~:text=The%20challenges%20facing%20young%20men,According%20to%20the%20National%20Institute). Economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton famously observed in the 2010s that mortality rates for middle-aged white Americans (particularly men) were rising due to suicide, opioids, and alcohol. This wave of despair largely hit Gen X and late Boomers. It signaled that many men who came of age in the 1980s–90s were entering midlife in crisis, without the support structures or coping skills they needed.

In short, Generation X males were **caught in a societal transition**. Traditional male pathways (steady blue-collar work, defined gender roles, authoritative father figures) were fading, but new pathways to success and meaning had not yet been established for them. The cultural narrative still treated men as default leaders of society, so little attention was paid to their struggles. As Reeves observes, institutions and attitudes did not keep up with the changes affecting men[brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu/books/of-boys-and-men/#:~:text=Boys%20and%20men%20are%20struggling,the%20same%20or%20even%20worsened). The problems remained mostly under the radar, flaring up in statistics like higher male dropout, depression, and suicide rates, but rarely addressed head-on. Gen X provided the first warnings of a brewing male identity crisis.

**Millennial Men: Struggling to Launch in the 21st Century**

Millennial men (born ~1981–1996) inherited many of Gen X’s challenges and saw them intensify. This generation came of age in an era of rapidly accelerating technology, evolving gender norms, and economic turbulence. The result has been a difficult landscape for many Millennial males to navigate as they attempt to find meaningful adult roles:

* **Academic and Career Gaps Widen:** By the time Millennials were in high school and college (1990s–2000s), girls had firmly overtaken boys in educational attainment. The college gender gap, which began in Gen X’s time, became even more pronounced. For example, among Millennials it became common for campuses to be ~60% female. Harvard University’s undergraduate body has been majority female for at least seven consecutive years[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20statistics%20paint%20a%20stark,profound%20social%20and%20economic%20shifts). Nationwide, this means **millennial women are obtaining degrees (and the associated career opportunities) at far higher rates than men**[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20statistics%20paint%20a%20stark,profound%20social%20and%20economic%20shifts). On one hand, this is a success story for women; on the other, society has not responded to what one scholar calls the “male malaise” of underachievement[brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu/books/of-boys-and-men/#:~:text=When%20Beauvoir%20was%20writing%20her,structural%20forces%20that%20apply%20to). Many millennial men who didn’t pursue college found themselves in a tough spot as the Great Recession hit in 2008–2009. With fewer manufacturing or trade jobs available, they experienced higher unemployment and drift. Even in the recovery, **men without degrees have struggled**. By 2020, one in three American men with only a high school diploma was out of the labor force (not working or looking for work), far above the rate for women with similar education[evidencebasedmentoring.org](https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/americas-boys-and-men-are-falling-behind-mentoring-can-help/#:~:text=Recent%20data%20paints%20a%20stark,of%20women). This economic marginalization left many millennial men feeling “not needed” – as Reeves puts it, a lot of young men are unsure **“that they are going to be needed by their families, by their communities, by society”**[evidencebasedmentoring.org](https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/americas-boys-and-men-are-falling-behind-mentoring-can-help/#:~:text=Globalization%2C%20which%20has%20led%20to,%E2%80%9D). That doubt signals a loss of purpose and belonging.
* **Delayed Adulthood and Purpose:** Millennials in general tended to delay traditional adult milestones (stable job, marriage, kids), but the delay has been especially acute for men. Sociologists note that the share of young men in their 20s living at home shot up for Millennials. We saw that by 2023, **20% of men aged 25–34 lived with parents** (nearly double the rate of women)[evidencebasedmentoring.org](https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/americas-boys-and-men-are-falling-behind-mentoring-can-help/#:~:text=force%2C%20representing%20over%20700%2C000%20fewer,of%20women). Relatedly, marriage rates plummeted among this generation. In 1990, 67% of 25–54 year-olds (late Boomers/Gen X) were married; by 2019 only 53% were married[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=This%C2%A0mismatch%C2%A0between%20men%20and%20women%E2%80%99s%20educational,to%2033). The never-married share nearly doubled (17% to 33%) in that period[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=This%C2%A0mismatch%C2%A0between%20men%20and%20women%E2%80%99s%20educational,to%2033). Millennial men make up a large portion of those never married. There are multiple factors (economic insecurity, shifting social expectations), but one dynamic is a **“mismatch” in the dating market** as women surge ahead educationally[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20impact%20on%20relationships%20and,the%20rest%20of%20the%20country)[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=This%C2%A0mismatch%C2%A0between%20men%20and%20women%E2%80%99s%20educational,to%2033). Women still “tend to seek partners of equal or higher socioeconomic status”[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20impact%20on%20relationships%20and,the%20rest%20of%20the%20country), which leaves many less-educated Millennial men struggling to find a foothold in family life. We now have a growing cohort of Millennial men in their late 20s and 30s who are single, childless, and often aimless – lacking the traditional identities of husband, father, provider that structured male purpose in the past. This can feed into feelings of alienation or frustration. Indeed, the *loneliness* epidemic among men became more apparent with millennials: friendship networks shrank (male friendship groups from college often dispersed, and unlike women, men are less likely to maintain close friendships through frequent communication[latimes.com](https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-01-15/men-friendship-gen-z-loneliness#:~:text=Guerrero%3A%20Why%20are%20men%20so,Survey%20Center%20on%20American%20Life)). Mental health data in the 2010s showed rising depression and suicide among young adult men, suggesting many were struggling with direction and meaning in life.
* **Cultural Confusion about Masculinity:** Millennial men also bore the brunt of rapidly changing cultural narratives around gender and masculinity. They reached adulthood during the #MeToo movement and a broader social reckoning with sexism and “toxic masculinity.” While it’s undoubtedly important to challenge abusive or misogynistic behavior, the public discourse often painted young men with a broad brush of suspicion or blame. Many Millennial men internalized a sense that traditional male traits were inherently “toxic,” yet they were not offered an alternative positive vision of masculinity. As writer Christine Emba observed, it felt like a “widespread identity crisis – as if [young men] didn’t know how to be” men anymore[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/#:~:text=trying%20on%20new%20identities%2C%20many,toward%20a%20desire%20to%20belong)[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/#:~:text=It%20felt%20like%20a%20widespread,didn%E2%80%99t%20know%20how%20to%20be). In interviews, she found young men genuinely asking **“What does good masculinity look like?”** and coming up empty[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/#:~:text=Reynolds%2C%2028%2C%20is%20a%20doctoral,the%20professors%20roaming%20the%20campus). Society was adept at telling men what *not* to be, but failed to provide a clear, constructive model of manhood to strive for. This left many Millennial males psychologically unmoored – unsure how to relate to women, how to channel their ambitions, or how to take pride in being a man in a socially acceptable way. Some reacted with defensiveness or tuned out these cultural messages; others were “quietly disappearing” into escapism like video games and pornography[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/#:~:text=They%20struggled%20to%20relate%20to,%E2%80%9D).
* **Retreat into the Virtual World:** Importantly, the Millennial generation was the first to grow up with the internet and online entertainment as ubiquitous parts of life. By the 2000s, video games, online forums, and later social media became major influences. For young men especially, the **virtual world offered an alluring escape** from real-world difficulties. Jonathan Haidt notes that from the earliest personal computers to modern online gaming, “the virtual world sent out a siren song that sounded sweeter, on average, to boys than to girls”[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Zach%20Rausch%20and%20I%20have,than%20it%20did%20to%20girls)[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=So%2C%20in%20the%20early%20phases,interacting%20with%20computers%20and%20smartphones). Millennial boys invested heavily in computers and games throughout the ‘90s and 2000s, often at the expense of other activities. By college age, many young men found more fulfillment in the **competitive thrills of online games** or the instant gratification of internet porn than in the real-life pursuits (school, dating, career) that lead to adult success[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=The%20virtual%20world%20was%20magical,virtual%29%20death)[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=,radical%20political%20ideas%20and%20identities). This cohort saw the rise of phenomena like the “World of Warcraft addict” or the young man glued to Xbox Live – precursors to today’s issues. Haidt and others argue that this digital pull became a key factor in male development: the real world **“got more frustrating”** for boys at the same time that video games and online media became more stimulating[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Just%20as%20video%20games%20became,on%20sitting%20still%20and%20listening). Schools shortened recess and banned rough play (outlets boys historically used to burn energy and socialize), making school feel even more stifling[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Just%20as%20video%20games%20became,on%20sitting%20still%20and%20listening). Meanwhile, games and internet communities gave young men a space where they could win, explore, and even find a form of social belonging – **but without actually growing**. By the end of the millennial era, a significant subset of young men had effectively **“withdrawn from the real world”** during their critical developmental years[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Boys%20are%20in%20trouble,in%20work%2C%20love%2C%20and%20marriage). They entered adulthood lacking real-life skills, work experience, and sometimes the motivation to succeed offline.

In sum, Millennial men’s experience has been one of **frustrated ambitions and deferred adulthood**. They are a generation told that old gender roles no longer apply, yet many fell behind as women raced ahead in education and empowerment programs. Lacking clear societal guidance, a number of young men drifted into detachment – living at home, working less, and finding solace in digital entertainment or extremist online subcultures. The result by the late 2010s was a sizable group of young men feeling left out of the American dream. As one commentator put it, “the most dangerous person in the world is a man that is broken and alone”[vox.com](https://www.vox.com/the-gray-area/390781/masculinity-scott-galloway-young-men-struggling#:~:text=Among%20the%20many%20headwinds%20in,far%20too%20many%20of%20them), and society seems to be producing far too many broken, lonely men. The Millennial male malaise set the stage for an even more severe crisis with the next generation, Gen Z.

**Gen Z Men: The Anxious Generation and the Identity Vacuum**

Generation Z (born ~1997–2012) has grown up in an era of smartphones, social media, and intense societal flux. For young men in Gen Z, nearly all the trends discussed above have reached a crescendo. This generation’s males are arguably the **most at-risk group** in terms of mental health and lack of direction, even as society continues to grapple with how to help them. Key characteristics of Gen Z men’s situation include:

* **Mental Health Crisis:** By all accounts, Gen Z is experiencing a mental health epidemic — and young men are very much part of it. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt notes that those born after 1996 have **“the worst mental health of any generation”** on record[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Since%202015%2C%20I%20have%20been,Generation%2C%E2%80%9D%20born%201900%20to%201925). Rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm began **surging around 2013** for teens, coinciding with the mass adoption of smartphones and social media[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Since%202015%2C%20I%20have%20been,Generation%2C%E2%80%9D%20born%201900%20to%201925)[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=What%20stands%20out%20is%20the,users%20are%20%E2%80%9Conly%E2%80%9D%20twice%20as). Initially, researchers focused on the spike in teen girls’ depression (which indeed skyrocketed), but Haidt’s deeper analysis found that **boys’ mental health had collapsed as well**, just in different ways[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Not%20quite,our%20efforts%20on%20helping%20girls)[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=That%E2%80%99s%20what%20I%20thought%20when,Zach%20Rausch%20and%20Richard%20Reeves). By 2019, about 8% of teen boys reported a major depressive episode in the past year versus 13% of girls, but the *relative* increase for boys since 2010 was actually slightly larger[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=But%20what%20about%20the%20relative,be%20seen%20in%20suicide%20rates). And when it comes to the most dire outcomes – suicide – boys greatly outnumber girls[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=On%20any%20measure%20related%20to,of%20a%20crisis%20for%20boys). Haidt concludes that we are seeing a true **crisis among boys**: their inner life has deteriorated, even if it was harder to see at first[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=That%E2%80%99s%20what%20I%20thought%20when,Zach%20Rausch%20and%20Richard%20Reeves). He points out that the **“collapse of boys’ mental health”** is driven by social and technological factors distinct from those affecting girls[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=are%20doing%20very%20badly%20too%2C,Zach%20Rausch%20and%20Richard%20Reeves). In particular, Gen Z boys have been drawn into an all-consuming virtual world (games, porn, YouTube, etc.) at the same time that real-world opportunities and support for them have stagnated. The result is high rates of alienation, nihilism, and despair. A telling indicator: by 2021, nearly **1 in 5 high school boys agreed that “people like me don’t have much chance at a successful life,”** a sharp increase in pessimism over prior decades[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=For%20boys%2C%20the%20pattern%20is,boys%20has%20a%20longer%20backstory). The mental health of Gen Z males has become a top concern for psychologists, with Haidt and colleagues calling it *“one of the most serious problems we face in America today”*[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=The%20mental%20health%20crisis%20afflicting,in%20the%20%2033%20Nordic).
* **Digital Escape and Radicalization:** If Millennials dabbled in digital escapes, Gen Z males are fully immersed in them. This generation was handed smartphones and tablets in childhood; many had an *online* social life before an offline one. By their teens, a large portion of Gen Z boys spend countless hours in virtual realms – whether that’s online gaming, endless video scrolling, or niche internet forums. Haidt describes how **each advance in digital technology** (from the first PCs to today’s multiplayer online games and algorithm-driven platforms) has increasingly **“pulled” boys away from reality**[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Zach%20Rausch%20and%20I%20have,than%20it%20did%20to%20girls)[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=So%2C%20in%20the%20early%20phases,interacting%20with%20computers%20and%20smartphones). Why is the pull stronger on boys? In part due to sex differences: boys on average are more drawn to **“things” over people**, to competitive rule-bound games, and to thrill-seeking[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Why%3F%20Among%20the%20most%20consistent,people%20are%20thinking%20and%20feeling)[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=The%20virtual%20world%20was%20magical,virtual%29%20death). The internet and gaming deliver these in spades – providing instant gratification, simulated achievement, and even social camaraderie (teaming up in a shooter game, for instance) without the difficulties of real-life interaction. By 2020s, we see many Gen Z young men who prefer the safety and excitement of virtual spaces to the challenges of school, work, and dating. Haidt notes with concern that **“many [boys] have withdrawn from the real world, where they could develop skills needed to become competent, successful, and loving men”**[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Boys%20are%20in%20trouble,in%20work%2C%20love%2C%20and%20marriage). Instead, they chase victories in video games or find superficial sexual fulfillment in online pornography, all of which **does nothing to prepare them for adult life**[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Boys%20are%20in%20trouble,in%20work%2C%20love%2C%20and%20marriage). Another dark side of this virtual immersion is exposure to extremist communities. Gen Z boys can easily stumble into the **“manosphere”** of misogynistic or alt-right influencers who exploit their frustrations. During the late 2010s and early 2020s, figures like Andrew Tate (a self-styled alpha male guru) and certain 4chan/Reddit communities gained massive followings among young men. These venues often validate anger and provide a *tribal* identity to lost boys, but they also promote distorted worldviews and hatred. Emba notes how some disaffected young men are being “sucked into the alt-right and the web of misogynistic communities known as the manosphere”[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/#:~:text=They%20struggled%20to%20relate%20to,%E2%80%9D) – essentially trying on toxic identities as a way to belong. The prevalence of young male involvement in online hate groups, and even their overrepresentation in acts of mass violence (98% of mass shooters are male[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20classroom%20is%20only%20one,generation%20of%20struggling%20young%20men)), underscores how **dangerously astray** a portion of Gen Z men have gone in search of purpose.
* **Attitudes Toward Relationships and Family:** Gen Z is showing a remarkable pullback from dating and family formation, especially among young men. Surveys indicate that **Gen Z males are dating at about half the rate that Gen X did as teenagers**[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=It%27s%20the%20worst%20amongst%20Gen,declining%20birth%20rates%2C%20and%20economic). Many high school and college-aged men report little interest in pursuing romantic relationships, a stark contrast to prior generations. Some of this may be youthful awkwardness or fear of rejection exacerbated by lack of real-life social practice. But cultural narratives likely play a role too. Today’s young men have grown up hearing about the potential harms of masculinity and the importance of respecting women’s autonomy, which, while positive in intent, may have *unintentionally* made the process of normal courtship feel perilous or unwelcoming for some boys. Combine that with the easy alternatives (online porn, virtual chats) and stricter social norms around consent, and you get more young men opting out of the dating scene altogether. By their early 20s, a significant number of Gen Z men remain inexperienced with relationships. This trend is mirrored in plummeting fertility and family formation: the U.S. birth rate hit **1.66, well below replacement**, by the 2020s[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=It%27s%20the%20worst%20amongst%20Gen,declining%20birth%20rates%2C%20and%20economic). If young men are not forming partnerships or seeing themselves as future fathers/providers, they lack a key pathway through which men traditionally found adult purpose. The long-term worry is a feedback loop of isolation – as one generation of men fails to establish families, the next grows up with even fewer fathers and male mentors, perpetuating the cycle.
* **No Clear Script for Masculinity:** Perhaps the most defining feature of the Gen Z male predicament is the **complete vacuum of positive masculine ideals**. By the 2020s, the notion of “toxic masculinity” is mainstream, but messages about **healthy masculinity** are rare. Schools and media have focused on empowering girls (with many excellent results), but few institutions have asked what a constructive male archetype should look like today. In fact, as one young man poignantly asked, *“What the heck does good masculinity look like?”* – and even his mentor “did not have an answer”[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/#:~:text=Reynolds%2C%2028%2C%20is%20a%20doctoral,the%20professors%20roaming%20the%20campus). This encapsulates Gen Z’s confusion. They are told everything that men shouldn’t be (don’t be aggressive, don’t be sexist, don’t be weak, etc.), yet they receive almost no guidance on what **to** be. The result is a generation of young men **uncertain how to define themselves**. Many oscillate between defensiveness (rejecting society’s critiques and doubling down on caricatures of machismo) and passivity (retreating from ambition or leadership altogether). Neither is healthy. The lack of a clear, positive roadmap to manhood – a role that is pro-social, ethical, and uniquely male – is arguably one of the biggest failings of modern culture regarding Gen Z men. It leaves a vacuum readily filled by bad actors or by aimless drifting. As Haidt and Reeves have noted, we’ve made considerable efforts in recent decades to create “Girl Power” and female empowerment initiatives, but we have not invested similarly in boys. There are virtually **no male-specific support programs** in schools or universities[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20cultural%20zeitgeist%20here%20must,breeds%20alienation%20among%20young%20men)[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=Stanford%20boasts%C2%A0fourteen%C2%A0women,the%20robust%20initiatives%20for%20women), even as men fall behind in enrollment. Major universities fund a plethora of women’s centers and mentorship groups (including fields where women now dominate), yet **zero analogous programs exist for men**[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=Stanford%20boasts%C2%A0fourteen%C2%A0women,the%20robust%20initiatives%20for%20women). Young men hear that they are privileged and thus don’t need help, but the outcomes suggest many *do* need guidance. As Reeves argues, helping boys and young men **“does not mean giving up on the ideal of gender equality”**[brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu/books/of-boys-and-men/#:~:text=of%20boyhood%20and%20manhood) – it is about leveling the support playing field to ensure both sexes thrive.

In summary, Generation Z’s men are in the throes of a full-blown identity and mental health crisis. Modern social structures – from family, to schools, to the labor market – have not adapted to their needs. Cultural narratives have largely either vilified masculinity or ignored young men’s longing for purpose. The consequence is a subset of young men who are **failing to launch** in the real world, instead languishing in virtual escapes or corrosive subcultures. As Haidt warns, if we don’t make the real world more appealing and rewarding for young men, we risk losing a generation of boys to perpetual adolescence in digital isolation[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=And%20all%20of%20this%20withdrawal,world%20more%20appealing%20for%20them). The stakes are high: not only for the men themselves, but for society at large, as large numbers of underdeveloped, disaffected young males can lead to increased social instability, violence, and economic stagnation[vox.com](https://www.vox.com/the-gray-area/390781/masculinity-scott-galloway-young-men-struggling#:~:text=Among%20the%20many%20headwinds%20in,far%20too%20many%20of%20them).

**Have We Failed Young Men?**

The evidence strongly suggests that **modern institutions and narratives have, in many ways, failed to provide young men with clear and constructive pathways to adulthood**. While there is no single villain or simple fix, multiple overlapping failures can be identified:

* **Educational Systems** – Schools have not adjusted to the developmental and learning needs of boys. From the earliest grades, a boy’s typical traits (high physical energy, slower maturation in reading and self-regulation) often clash with school expectations[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Just%20as%20video%20games%20became,on%20sitting%20still%20and%20listening)[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=Furthermore%2C%20we%20must%20consider%20the,junctures%20in%20their%20academic%20careers). Instead of innovating to keep boys engaged – for instance, by providing more male mentors, hands-on learning, or delayed school start ages for boys – we mostly doubled down on the existing structure. The result is that boys are less likely to excel academically, more likely to be labeled “problematic,” and ultimately less likely to attend or finish college[apnews.com](https://apnews.com/article/high-school-graduation-rate-boys-c7b8dff33221e0ded2d1369397d96455#:~:text=More%20than%2045%2C000%20fewer%20boys,available%20from%2037%20reporting%20states)[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20statistics%20paint%20a%20stark,profound%20social%20and%20economic%20shifts). That represents a lost foundation for many young men’s futures.
* **Economic and Policy Shifts** – The transition to a service- and knowledge-based economy left many men, especially working-class men, with fewer routes to a stable, respectable livelihood[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=In%20Of%20Boys%20and%20Men%2C,away%20from%20the%20real%20world). Other than encouraging everyone to go to college (where men have lagged), there has been little targeted effort to help young men adapt – for example, through vocational training revival, apprenticeships, or incentives in male-dominated trades. As good blue-collar jobs disappeared and nothing replaced them, countless men ended up underemployed or idle. Yet policymakers were slow to recognize this growing pool of unmoored young men. Only recently have some economists and writers begun spotlighting the plight of “men without work.” The lack of a clear economic role feeds men’s sense of not being needed in society[evidencebasedmentoring.org](https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/americas-boys-and-men-are-falling-behind-mentoring-can-help/#:~:text=Globalization%2C%20which%20has%20led%20to,%E2%80%9D).
* **Family and Community** – Social structures that traditionally helped boys grow into men have weakened. The decline of two-parent families means many boys lack a father figure to set an example (and the importance of fathers to boys’ success is well-documented[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=While%20girls%20tend%20to%20show,as%20likely%20to%20be%20incarcerated)). Community organizations that used to offer young men mentorship, discipline, and purpose – like churches, youth clubs, or civic groups – have also seen declining male participation. The net effect is that a boy may go through childhood and adolescence without ever having a male mentor or leader to emulate. Jonathan Haidt remarked that **“boys are in trouble”** because so many have withdrawn from real-world activities where they would traditionally develop into responsible men[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=Boys%20are%20in%20trouble,in%20work%2C%20love%2C%20and%20marriage). We have not invested in replacements for those socializing forces. Programs like the former Boy Scouts (which has diminished in reach) or new mentorship initiatives for boys are few and far between.
* **Culture and Narrative** – Modern culture has arguably failed young men most profoundly in the realm of narrative. We have, as a society, articulated an inspiring narrative for female empowerment: girls today grow up hearing that they can be anything and that female leadership and ambition are positive. We have not given boys a comparably affirmative narrative about being a man. In fact, many hear more about the sins of the patriarchy or the dangers of male aggression than about any noble calling of manhood. As one report put it, *“in our efforts to empower young women over the past few decades, we have neglected the unique challenges facing boys.”*[stanfordreview.org](https://stanfordreview.org/young-men-in-crisis/#:~:text=The%20cultural%20zeitgeist%20here%20must,breeds%20alienation%20among%20young%20men) The term “toxic masculinity” is commonplace (and refers to real problems), but there is no widely championed concept of “healthy masculinity” in mainstream culture. The absence of this positive vision leaves well-intentioned boys feeling uncertain or even guilty about their male identity. Meanwhile, it leaves struggling boys easy prey for bad actors who *do* offer a narrative – however destructive – that “gives men permission to be men.” The popularity of controversial figures like Jordan Peterson or online influencers like Andrew Tate among young men reflects a hunger for guidance. These figures often step in where families and schools fear to tread, speaking directly to male longing for purpose, confidence, and direction. The content of their messages varies widely (from Peterson’s calls for personal responsibility to Tate’s toxic bravado), but the common denominator is that they address young men *in a way mainstream institutions stopped doing*. As a result, a generation of young males is being shaped heavily by YouTubers, podcasters, and forum communities. This is a wild-west form of socialization, and it’s no surprise that many boys emerge with skewed or stunted development. Society at large has only belatedly recognized this “battle for the bros,” as one recent analysis dubbed it[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/#:~:text=The%20weirdness%20manifested%20in%20the,gesturing%20toward%20a%20desire%20to)[vox.com](https://www.vox.com/the-gray-area/390781/masculinity-scott-galloway-young-men-struggling#:~:text=Among%20the%20many%20headwinds%20in,far%20too%20many%20of%20them), and we are playing catch-up now to counteract years of benign neglect toward boys’ needs.

In light of all this, it would be hard to argue that there *isn’t* a real gap in how we support and guide men. Across generations, men have been expected to “just figure it out” even as the traditional script for their lives was torn up. Gen X had to improvise; many stumbled. Millennials were told to check their male privilege, even as a large number quietly fell behind. Gen Z is now openly in crisis, their struggles finally drawing public concern.

The consensus among a growing body of experts is that **we must actively bridge this gap**. Psychologist Jean Twenge, Jonathan Haidt, Richard Reeves, Scott Galloway and others – from various political and academic backgrounds – have all sounded alarms about boys and young men. They emphasize that helping young men thrive is not a zero-sum game; it will not set back the progress of women. Rather, it is essential for a healthy, well-functioning society[brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu/books/of-boys-and-men/#:~:text=Reeves%20looks%20at%20the%20structural,the%20ideal%20of%20gender%20equality). Reeves advocates for boy-friendly education reforms (such as starting boys in school a year later, given their developmental lag)[brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu/books/of-boys-and-men/#:~:text=In%20some%20ways%20the%20world,start%20school%20a%20year%20later), more male teachers and mentors, and targeted vocational programs for young men. Others call for rebuilding social fabric that engages men – from local fatherhood initiatives to mental health outreach tailored to men (reducing stigma around men seeking help). The key is to **provide clear pathways** for men to channel their energies into constructive roles: as supportive partners, involved fathers, productive workers, and community leaders. Young men, like all young people, need to feel **needed** and valued. As of now, too many do not.

**Conclusion**

Across Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z, we see a pattern of men struggling to find their place amid rapid cultural and economic shifts. The data on educational underachievement, labor force withdrawal, and mental distress among males is not imaginary – it is very real[vox.com](https://www.vox.com/the-gray-area/390781/masculinity-scott-galloway-young-men-struggling#:~:text=There%E2%80%99s%20a%20growing%20body%20of,overdoses%20and%20deaths%20by%20suicide)[thefp.com](https://www.thefp.com/p/jonathan-haidt-worried-about-the-boys-too#:~:text=That%E2%80%99s%20what%20I%20thought%20when,Zach%20Rausch%20and%20Richard%20Reeves). The gap in support and guidance for young men has had profound consequences, from personal suffering to broader social ills. Modern social structures and narratives have indeed fallen short: they dismantled outdated molds of manhood but failed to offer a positive new model, leaving many young men in a state of drift or rebellion.

The research and commentary surveyed here make it clear that addressing the male support gap is both important and possible. It starts with **recognition**: acknowledging that boys and men, like any group, can face unique challenges that merit attention. From there, a more balanced approach can emerge – one where we champion young women *and* young men, without detracting from either. As Richard Reeves writes, helping the “other half” (males) advance need not come at anyone else’s expense[brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu/books/of-boys-and-men/#:~:text=Reeves%20looks%20at%20the%20structural,the%20ideal%20of%20gender%20equality). In fact, it promises a win-win: healthier men will mean healthier families, workplaces, and communities.

In practical terms, this means reinvesting in male mentorship, updating educational practices, creating economic opportunities for non-college-bound men, and yes, talking openly about masculinity. Society should offer young men a version of masculinity that is **compatible with modern values** – one that prizes responsibility, empathy, and purpose, not the old caricatures of domination or the nihilistic retreat into isolation. Without clear and constructive pathways to become well-rounded men, too many will continue to flounder or follow destructive roads. But with thoughtful support, today’s boys and young men can absolutely thrive alongside their female peers. The gap in support for men is real; fortunately, so is the potential to close it, if we choose to act with the same directness and thoughtfulness that we expect from the young men we aim to help.

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