DAVID BROOKS

The Crisis of Men and Boys

Sept. 29, 2022

By David Brooks
Opinion Columnist

If you've been paying attention to the social trends, you probably have some inkling that boys and men are struggling, in the U.S. and across the globe.

They are struggling in the classroom. American girls are 14 percentage points more likely to be "school ready" than boys at age 5, controlling for parental characteristics. By high school two-thirds of the students in the top 10 percent of the class, ranked by G.P.A., are girls, while roughly two-thirds of the students at the lowest decile are boys. In 2020, at the 16 top American law schools, not a single one of the flagship law reviews had a man as editor in chief.

Men are struggling in the workplace. One in three American men with only a high school diploma is now out of the labor force. The biggest drop in employment is among young men aged 25 to 34. Men who entered the work force in 1983 will earn about 10 percent less in real terms in their lifetimes than those who started a generation earlier. Over the same period, women's lifetime earnings have increased 33 percent. Pretty much all of the income gains that middle-class American families have enjoyed since 1970 are because of increases in women's earnings.

Men are also struggling physically. Men account for close to three out of every four "deaths of despair" — suicide and drug overdoses. For every 100 middle-aged women who died of Covid up to mid-September 2021, there were 184 middle-aged men who died.

Richard V. Reeves's new book, "Of Boys and Men," is a landmark, one of the most important books of the year, not only because it is a comprehensive look at the male crisis, but also because it searches for the roots of that crisis and offers solutions.

I learned a lot I didn't know. First, boys are much more hindered by challenging environments than girls. Girls in poor neighborhoods and unstable families may be able to climb their way out. Boys are less likely to do so. In Canada, boys born into the poorest households are twice as likely to remain poor as their female counterparts. In American schools, boys' academic performance is more influenced by family background than girls' performance. Boys raised by single parents have lower rates of college enrollment than girls raised by single parents.

Second, policies and programs designed to promote social mobility often work for women, but not men. Reeves, a scholar at the Brookings Institution, visited Kalamazoo, Mich., where, thanks to a donor, high school graduates get to go to many colleges in the state free. The program increased the number of women getting college degrees by 45 percent. The men's graduation rates remained flat. Reeves lists a whole series of programs, from early childhood education to college support efforts, that produced impressive gains for women, but did not boost men.

Reeves has a series of policy proposals to address the crisis, the most controversial of which is redshirting boys — have them begin their schooling a year later than girls, because on average the prefrontal cortex and the cerebellum, which are involved in self-regulation, mature much earlier in girls than in boys.

There are many reasons men are struggling — for example, the decline in manufacturing jobs that put a high value on physical strength, and the rise of service sector jobs. But I was struck by the theme of demoralization that wafts through the book. Reeves talked to men in Kalamazoo about why women were leaping ahead. The men said that women are just more motivated, work harder, plan ahead better. Yet this is not a matter of individual responsibility. There is something in modern culture that is producing an aspiration gap.

Many men just seem less ambitious. College women are roughly twice as likely to enroll in study abroad programs as college men. In 2020, amid Covid, the decline in college enrollment for male students was seven times that of female students. As Reeves puts it: "It is not that men have fewer opportunities. It is that they are not taking them."

More men are leading haphazard and lonely lives. Roughly 15 percent of men say they have no close friends, up from 3 percent in 1990. One in five fathers doesn't live with his children. In 2014, more young men were living with their parents than with a wife or partner. Apparently even many who are married are not ideal mates. Wives are twice as likely to initiate divorces as husbands.

I come away with the impression that many men are like what Dean Acheson said about Britain after World War II. They have lost an empire but not yet found a role. Many men have an obsolete ideal: Being a man means being the main breadwinner for your family. Then they can't meet that ideal. Demoralization follows.

Ambition doesn't just happen; it has to be fired. The culture is still searching for a modern masculine ideal. It is not instilling in many boys the nurturing and emotional skills that are so desperately important today. A system that labels more than a fifth of all boys as developmentally disabled is not instilling in them a sense of confidence and competence.

Masculinity has gone haywire. Reverting to pseudo-macho cartoons like Donald Trump and Josh Hawley doesn't help.

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GUEST ESSAY

This Isn't Your Old Toxic Masculinity. It Has Taken an Insidious New Form.

Jan. 13, 2022

By Alex McElroy
Mx. McElroy is the author of the novel "The Atmospherians," about two friends who start a cult to reform problematic men.

Toxic masculinity is so 2017.

It hasn't disappeared, of course, but in the years since #MeToo, many men have been trying to drop the stoicism and anger that have long warped masculinity. Some are seeking therapy. Others have enrolled in workshops and men's groups in an effort to get in touch with their feelings and become better men. For better or worse, everyone you know is watching "Ted Lasso." The strong, silent type is losing some of his allure.

My personal relationship to masculinity is fraught. I spent my first 31 years moving through spaces where I didn't feel I belonged, and I was often told implicitly or explicitly that I wasn't performing maleness correctly. I cried often as a child, and a cousin once pulled me aside to tell me that as a boy I should never cry unless I had a cut running from my eye to my ankle. In high school, after telling my best friend that my grandfather died, he asked me to please leave his house if I was planning to cry.

Two years ago, I came out as a nonbinary trans person. Expressing my true gender identity did not immediately fix my relationship with vulnerability, but it led me to delve deeper into what vulnerability is and how it can operate. As it happens, vulnerability was having a cultural moment — as the topic of popular TED talks and the focus of groups invested in helping men evolve, such as The ManKind Project and Evryman (whose men's retreats echoed earlier movements encouraging self-reflection in men, including Robert Bly's "mythopoetic men's movement").

It has been exciting to watch as more men embrace vulnerability. At a men's group meeting in 2019, I saw men like those I knew growing up taking responsibility for their actions and feelings. This was far from the new normal, but at least men were coming together to talk. I began to feel hopeful about the state of masculinity.

But my hope has begun to diminish as I've watched male vulnerability curdle into something toxic: Let's call it petulant vulnerability.

Think of the boyfriend professing loneliness to ensure his partner never sees their friends. Or the hundreds of texts and anecdotes of so-called softbois collected on the @beam_me_up_softboi Instagram account — men who express their feelings the way avalanches share snow, often as a form of manipulation or passive aggression. On the HBO Show "Succession," Kendall Roy professes his empathy with the plight of abused women only to feed his narcissistic desires. And the film "Promising Young Woman" showcased the horror of the "nice guy" whose sensitivity slides stealthily into misogyny and abuse.

There have been some extreme examples in high-profile court cases of the past year. The courtroom tears of Kyle Rittenhouse, who was later acquitted in the deaths of two men he shot and the wounding of another, and Travis McMichael, who, along with his father and a neighbor, was convicted of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, were public displays of petulant vulnerability. They show strikingly how this aggrieved, self-righteous mind-set privileges one's own vulnerability over that of others: The crying killer doesn't recognize the vulnerability of his victim.

The aftermath of last year's Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol was a festival of petulant vulnerability. While the attack itself was violent and wrathful, many in the mostly male mob, who screamed obscenities or threw heavy objects at police officers that day, later wept as they expressed shame, offered excuses or complained about jobs and friends they lost. One rioter even blamed "Foxitis" for his actions: His lawyer argued that months of watching Fox News had destabilized him to the point where he started believing untruths. Classic toxic masculinity was on full display when those would-be heroes rallied to "save America" on Jan. 6, but some became hapless patsies once they were held accountable. Their capes became baby blankets.

Petulant vulnerability is not, of course, confined to men. An example can be found in the case of Amy Cooper, the woman who was filmed falsely reporting to the police that "an African-American man is threatening my life," her voice sounding breathless and panicked, after a bird watcher in Central Park asked her to leash her dog.

What is real vulnerability? Brené Brown, a researcher whose work on vulnerability has made her a celebrity, defines it as "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure" in her 2013 book "Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead." Petulant vulnerability, however, uses the language of vulnerability as a cudgel. If true vulnerability means accepting

change, personal fallibility and the human condition of reliance on others, petulant vulnerability feigns emotional fragility as a means of retaining power.

If true vulnerability seems scary, it is — but that doesn't make expressing it any less necessary, for men as for everyone. What if, on Jan. 5, 2021, a man upset by Donald Trump's electoral defeat had confessed to friends and loved ones that he was afraid and that he felt he was losing control in a world he believed no longer valued him? What if he had sat with those feelings, cried if he wanted to and discussed how to chart his path in a changing landscape? *That* would have been vulnerable.

This kind of vulnerability can be difficult, of course. Even as men's groups committed to positive change gain prominence, our society still broadly enforces traditional masculinity norms and restrictions. And online there are plenty of spaces where extremely toxic behavior is encouraged and applauded — some of which also deploy the language of vulnerability. In incel forums, for example, rather than working through the pain of being sexually rejected, men lash out at the women they feel they deserve — occasionally resulting in horrific violence.

So, what's to be done? Though men's discussion groups and more nuanced male leads on TV cannot, on their own, shift our expectations of manhood, the fact that they exist and are gaining popularity counts for something. "Men cannot change if there are no blueprints for change," bell hooks wrote in her 2005 book "The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love," where she uses feminist thinking to show men how to overcome their conditioning.

The hard part is yet to come. Change is taxing and boring and scary. It requires humility and vulnerability — the real stuff, not the cheap imitation. And it requires letting go of what some men feel entitled to. The rewards, however, will make this effort worthwhile.

"To know love," Ms. hooks writes, "men must be able to let go the will to dominate."

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In Search of Non-Toxic Manhood

The Victorian novelists understood the problem before we did.

Jan. 19, 2019

By Ross Douthat
Opinion Columnist

One of the frustrating tics of our society's progressive vanguard is the assumption that every evil it discovers was entirely invisible in the past, that this generation is the first to wrestle with dominance and cruelty.

This forgetting of human experience, this perpetual present-tenseness, pervades the latest flashpoint in the culture war over the sexes — the new guidelines for treating male pathology from the American Psychological Association.

The trouble with men, the guidelines argue, is that they're violent and reckless, far more likely than women to end up in prison or dead before their time. But the deeper problem is they're prisoners of "traditional masculinity," which the guidelines describe as a model of manhood marked by "emotional stoicism, homophobia, not showing vulnerability, self-reliance and competitiveness." This tough-guy ideal encourages "aggression and violence as a means to resolve interpersonal conflict," and tempts men toward rape, drug abuse and suicide.

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Are men so tempted? Certainly. The human male is a dangerous figure — generally bigger, stronger and more violent than the female of the species, free from the vulnerability that pregnancy entails, and therefore often distinctively threatening, to women and other men alike.

But the claim that a "traditional masculinity" encompassing "stoicism" and "self-reliance" necessarily makes this problem worse is mostly ahistorical rubbish — not least because in the actual history of the human race "traditional masculinity" as a single coherent category simply does not exist.

To pluck only Western examples, there is no single "traditional" model that can encompass strong, silent types and romantic poets, chivalric knights and laconic cowboys, the sorrowing Young Werther and the stiffened upper lip, the machismo of the Mediterranean and the mysticism of the Celts, Jimmy Stewart and Cary Grant and John Wayne.

What actually exists in history, instead, are varying models that attempt to deal with masculinity's dark side in different ways, by channeling, sublimating and containing male aggression. All these models are "traditional" in the sense they were forged in societies more sexist and patriarchal than ours. But they were also forged by cultures well aware of the problem of toxic, reckless, violent men, and very concerned with what to do about them.

Consider, just to pick a reasonably accessible example, the portraits of masculinity offered in the 19th century novel. The toxic bachelor is a fixture in its pages, from Wickham in "Pride and Prejudice" to Vronsky in "Anna Karenina" to Angel Clare in "Tess of the D'Urbervilles." And Victorian novelists both male and female are consistently preoccupied with the question of how a healthier manhood can be embodied.

The stoic model critiqued in the A.P.A. guidelines is one attempted embodiment — but only one. There is also the romantic model, who channels lust into romantic idealism, aggression into artistic ambition or religious purpose. And then there is the gentleman, whose persona seeks to balance self-control with idealism, politesse with passion, holding all in synthesis.

The 19th-century canon doesn't imply that a single model always works. In "Far From the Madding Crowd," the hero, Gabriel Oak, is a stoic with a well-integrated romantic streak; his foil and rival for the heroine's affections, William Boldwood, believes himself a stoic but discovers a romanticism he can't control, with violent consequences. In "Pride and Prejudice," Mr. Darcy's gentlemanly self-conception needs the leaven of humility that only romance can provide. The plot of "Wuthering Heights" turns on the question of whether Heathcliff's romantic appeal is really toxic.

Then, too, across the life-cycle the models may need to shift — romanticism tempered by stoicism for the young, the reverse for fathers of young children, and some gentlemanly combination in old age.

So every model has limits — but it's folly to blame any or all of them for the pathologies they aspire to tame. (Stoicism, especially, doesn't exactly seem oversupplied in America these days.) Yet that's what contemporary progressivism is constantly inclined to do: Because the male archetypes were forged in more sexist eras, that sexism is regarded as a reason to reject the archetypes *tout court*, in the hopes of

building some sort of New Progressive Man instead.

In overreaction to this rejection, conservatives in the Trump era have ended up defending a caddishness that would make Wickham blush, in the mistaken belief that they're defending masculinity itself. But the New Progressive Man isn't much of a success either: If you listen to liberal women complaining about the male-feminist cads and "soft-boys" in their dating pool, progressive culture seems to have ended up creating a lot of Uriah Heeps and Gilbert Osmonds — men pretending to reject the masculine vices, but really sublimating them into softer forms of exploitation.

The alternative, adapting the older archetypes to an era of greater equality between the sexes, is admittedly a difficult task. But it's a better path than throwing out the older models, and all their wisdom with them, and then cursing Gabriel Oak and Gary Cooper because toxic masculinity hasn't gone away.

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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Boys Are Not All Right

By Michael Ian Black
Feb. 21, 2018

I used to have this one-liner: "If you want to emasculate a guy friend, when you're at a restaurant, ask him everything that he's going to order, and then when the waitress comes … order for him." It's funny because it shouldn't be that easy to rob a man of his masculinity — but it is.

Last week, 17 people, most of them teenagers, were shot dead at a Florida school. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School now joins the ranks of Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, Columbine and too many other sites of American carnage. What do these shootings have in common? Guns, yes. But also, boys. Girls aren't pulling the triggers. It's boys. It's almost always boys.

America's boys are broken. And it's killing us.

The brokenness of the country's boys stands in contrast to its girls, who still face an abundance of obstacles but go into the world increasingly well equipped to take them on.

The past 50 years have redefined what it means to be female in America. Girls today are told that they can do anything, be anyone. They've absorbed the message: They're outperforming boys in school at every level. But it isn't just about performance. To be a girl today is to be the beneficiary of decades of conversation about the complexities of womanhood, its many forms and expressions.

Boys, though, have been left behind. No commensurate movement has emerged to help them navigate toward a full expression of their gender. It's no longer enough to "be a man" — we no longer even know what that means.

Too many boys are trapped in the same suffocating, outdated model of masculinity, where manhood is measured in strength, where there is no way to be vulnerable without being emasculated, where manliness is about having power over others. They are trapped, and they don't even have the language to talk about how they feel about being trapped, because the language that exists to discuss the full range of human emotion is still viewed as sensitive and feminine.

Men feel isolated, confused and conflicted about their natures. Many feel that the very qualities that used to define them — their strength, aggression and competitiveness — are no longer wanted or needed; many others never felt strong or aggressive or competitive to begin with. We don't know how to be, and we're terrified.

But to even admit our terror is to be reduced, because we don't have a model of masculinity that allows for fear or grief or tenderness or the day-to-day sadness that sometimes overtakes us all.

Case in point: A few days ago, I posted a brief thread about these thoughts on Twitter, knowing I would receive hateful replies in response. I got dozens of messages impugning my manhood; the mildest of them called me a "soy boy" (a common insult among the alt-right that links soy intake to estrogen).

And so the man who feels lost but wishes to preserve his fully masculine self has only two choices: withdrawal or rage. We've seen what withdrawal and rage have the potential to do. School shootings are only the most public of tragedies. Others, on a smaller scale, take place across the country daily; another commonality among shooters is a history of abuse toward women.

To be clear, most men will never turn violent. Most men will turn out fine. Most will learn to navigate the deep waters of their feelings without ever engaging in any form of destruction. Most will grow up to be kind. But many will not.

We will probably never understand why any one young man decides to end the lives of others. But we can see at least one pattern and that pattern is glaringly obvious. It's boys.

I believe in boys. I believe in my son. Sometimes, though, I see him, 16 years old, swallowing his frustration, burying his worry, stomping up the stairs without telling us what's wrong, and I want to show him what it looks like to be vulnerable and open but I can't. Because I was a boy once, too.

There has to be a way to expand what it means to be a man without losing our masculinity. I don't know how we open ourselves to the rich complexity of our manhood. I think we would benefit from the same conversations girls and women have been having for these past 50 years.

I would like men to use feminism as an inspiration, in the same way that feminists used the civil rights movement as theirs. I'm not advocating a quick fix. There isn't one. But we have to start the conversation. Boys are broken, and I want to help.

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