

# Men Without Meaning: The Harmful Effects of Expressive Individualism

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*Men and boys are struggling mentally, physically, academically, economically, and spiritually because of the absence of fathers, the failures of our education system and policies, and changes in both the job market and our culture. Playing a key role behind the scenes is expressive individualism, a radical autonomy that replaces the embodied relational person, connected to family and human nature, with the isolated psychological self who constructs his or her own morality. Solutions to the boy crisis must encourage relationships rather than personal license. They must repair the ties between inalienable rights and their accompanying duties, between happiness and virtue, and better situate the individual within the broader social matrices that truly shape him: God, family, and country.*

Millions of boys and men in America are unmoored, if not lost. In both subtle and not-so-subtle ways, they are told they are unneeded. Boys find themselves in classrooms that seem designed to frustrate them. Single men live in their mom's basements playing video games. Those who marry become the dolt detached dad starring as the lead in *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Such caricatures are intended to be the stuff of comedy, but their tragic counterparts are the hillbilly elegy men south of Richmond who are "puttin' themselves six feet in the ground / 'Cause all this damn country does is keep on kickin' them down."<sup>1</sup>

A slew of books and articles over the past several decades have covered the boy crisis. They have titles such as:

- *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Policies Are Harming Our Young Men;*
- *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes;*
- *The Boy Crisis: Why Our Boys Are Struggling and What We Can Do About It;*
- *Men Without Work: America's Invisible Crisis;* and
- *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It.*

This literature points to the absence of fathers, the failures of our education system and policies, and changes in both the job market and our culture, among other things, as culprits in creating and exacerbating the boy crisis. What unifies such texts is not a single policy, but a question: How and why are boys and men struggling to flourish?

This essay will summarize and synthesize this literature (though there is naturally some disagreement among the authors of these books and between them and this essay) and complement this body of work by focusing on an idea that seems to recur in these areas: expressive individualism. This toxic notion promotes radical autonomy by replacing the embodied relational person, connected to family and human nature, with the isolated psychological self who constructs his or her own morality. It underlies the boy crisis, playing a key role behind the scenes both in the breakdown of marriage, the family, and education and in the adoption of detrimental public policies.

If we want to reverse the boy crisis in culture and public policy, we must identify the animating ideas behind it. The boy crisis is not merely a legislative problem. It is a spiritual crisis due in no small measure to a false view of what it means to be human. To match our current moment, solutions to the boy crisis must encourage relationships rather than personal license. They must repair the ties between inalienable rights and their accompanying duties, between happiness and virtue, and better situate the individual within the broader social matrices that truly shape him: God, family, and country.

## What Is the Boy Crisis?

Political scientist Warren Farrell and counselor John Gray's *The Boy Crisis* provides a comprehensive outline of the crisis with staggering statistics. The crisis is mental, physical, economic, and academic. On average, the IQs of boys are dropping, and the gap between women's life expectancy and men's is increasing.<sup>2</sup> In the United Kingdom, the leading cause of death for men under 50 years old is suicide; in the United States, it is the second leading cause of death for men under 45 years old.<sup>3</sup> In 2020, only 25 percent of men ages 17–24 (slightly more than the 21 percent of females) qualified for military service; the majority were disqualified for being overweight, having issues with drug abuse, for mental health and medical/physical reasons, or for a combination of those factors.<sup>4</sup>

Compared to 41 percent of girls, 20 percent of boys are at least proficient in writing, and girls score on average 0.15 standard deviations above boys in reading from kindergarten through high school at a time when reading and verbal skills predict college attendance and having a formal education helps to ensure economic stability.<sup>5</sup> Men now earn approximately 40 percent of college degrees, while “[o]ver the last forty years, the median annual earnings of a boy with just a high school diploma dropped 26 percent.”<sup>6</sup> More than seven million men between the ages of 25 and 55 have checked out of the workforce—a problem primarily afflicting men without a college education.<sup>7</sup>

These statistics are jarring evidence that millions of boys and men are in trouble. Yes, men dominate *Fortune* 500 lists, but such men are a non-representative sample; a singular data point of male achievement does not stand up against the numerous indicators of faltering. An elite fraction of men becoming careerists is a measure of success that elevates personal achievement in work over a more holistic vision: one rooted in civic, family, and spiritual life. It is right to ask whether a man has employment that creates value and matches his goals and skills, but we should also ask:

- Is he thriving in his community?
- Is he living a virtuous and fulfilling life?
- Is he acting as a dependable and strong husband and father?
- Is he helping to form citizens who are capable of self-government and can take responsibility for themselves, their families, and their communities?

For some men, the answer to all these questions is “yes.” But for more and more of them, the answer is “no.”

The crisis men are now experiencing is the result of decades of harmful ideas, policies, and even technologies. These elements have often exacerbated each other, making the boy crisis more acute and complex. Moreover, because the state of men helps to shape the state of society, the boy crisis is at once a driver and symptom of fundamental societal ills.

## The Sexual Revolution and Expressive Individualism

We can trace many of the disruptions of familial mores to the sexual revolution and the dramatic development of expressive individualism. The sexual revolution that began in the 1970s was a rolling cultural and intellectual movement that challenged and displaced interpersonal and sexual norms. Those challenges included promoting hook-up culture and pornography through magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*, as well as the claim that sex can be divorced from gender with gender being understood as a social construct.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution*, theologian Carl Trueman provides an intellectual history of the sexual revolution. He focuses especially on the development of expressive individualism, the notion that the authentic self is radically autonomous and personally constructed rather than an embodied person embedded in a rich web of relationships. It is a radical turn away from objective truth toward subjectivity. The intellectual architects of the sexual revolution included, among others, feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who contended that one is not born but becomes a woman; psychologist Sigmund Freud, who placed human sexuality as central to behavior and identity; and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that men and women are naturally good and it is society that corrupts.

As indicated by its philosophic roots, expressive individualism constitutes such a stark divergence from American individualism that it could more properly be termed “expressive autonomy.” As understood by the Founders, individualism entailed reciprocal rights and duties, was grounded in human nature, and promoted the development of personal competencies for the purpose of providing for oneself, family, and community. It was independence from reliance on government and nested within families and communities, which is markedly different from the radical notion put forth by expressive autonomy that all human relationships are unnecessary and limiting.

Technological developments, particularly the invention of the birth control pill and later reproductive interventions, made the ideas of the sexual revolution seem plausible and implementable. It is simply hard to imagine how men and women can be interchangeable when women conceive children and men do not. The pill (as well as abortion) seemed to bring the aspirations of total sameness and the conquering of nature within reach. If women were freed from the burdens of childbearing and child care, they would be freed from the biological realities that prevented them from being just like men—from the tyranny of biology itself. (And if men and women are interchangeable, so are mothers and fathers, and fathers can more easily be labeled nonessential.) Or so the argument goes. Consequently, the pill separated sex from love, marriage, and children, and *Cosmopolitan* magazine rose to glamorize the single life and urge women and men to have sex without emotion or attachment.<sup>9</sup>

Certain sexual revolutionaries also aimed explicitly to destroy the nuclear family. Wilhelm Reich is considered by some to be the father of the sexual revolution in America. His thinking combined the unholy alliance of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. As one author has summarized, Reich viewed the family “as the destructive institutional tool of a broader social and sadistic morality: the morality of capitalism.”

To destroy capitalism, Reich posited that the old socialists’ logical arguments about economic exploitation were insufficient; one must destroy the moral habits upon which capitalism is founded, such as self-restraint, industry, frugality, and punctuality. Hence the Reichian dialectic: Sexual repression was intertwined with economic exploitation, and sexual liberation would destroy the basis for capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

Destroying the American family was a means of bringing about a total revolution within American society. By aiming for such destruction and promoting expressive individualism, sexual revolutionaries contributed to the boy crisis.

## Fatherhood

If there is a single direct driver of the boy crisis, it is the absence of fathers. Today, approximately 40 percent of children are born out of wedlock. Just 62 percent of Millennials were raised by both parents, compared to 71 percent of Gen Xers, 85 percent of Baby Boomers, and 87 percent of Silents.<sup>11</sup>

Farrell and Grey’s *The Boy Crisis* gives a robust account of the unique contributions of fathers, which are substantive and multitudinous. Whether

or not dad is present impacts school achievement, verbal intelligence and quantitative abilities, school dropouts, employment, suicide, drugs, homelessness, bullying, victimization, violent crime, rape, poverty and mobility, hypertension, trust, and empathy.<sup>12</sup> The effects are immediate and far-reaching, extending from the development of children’s brains to their life expectancy. For example:

Telomeres in our cells are what keep our genes from being deleted as our cells divide. As the National Academy of Sciences reports, “Telomere length in early life predicts lifespan”.... Children with father loss already have by age nine telomeres that are 14 percent shorter. However, when compared to girls, the telomere damage from father loss is “40% greater for boys.”<sup>13</sup>

While dads contribute in many ways to the raising of children, play is particularly important for childhood development because it “permits the young brain to remain flexible, enabling it to react to an immense variety of potential stimuli.”<sup>14</sup> Play begins when a baby is around six to nine months old. Think of the belly laugh that erupts from a toddler as dad throws his child up into the air, seemingly testing the bounds of safety but always maintaining control. Not something to be treated as frivolous, play is essential to regulating and channeling impulses and learning the confines of the human body. The developmental benefits include “enhanced physical fitness and improved cognitive, emotional and social function.”<sup>15</sup> Strikingly, mammals “that are deprived of play won’t develop to their full capacity.”<sup>16</sup> While it is essential for all children, by preschool, boys can be particularly active, aggressive, impulsive, demanding, and adventurous and have a tendency to dominate peers; play is a means of properly directing those instincts.<sup>17</sup>

Through play, children are constantly testing and expanding their limits and overcoming challenges, often with dad’s encouragement. Play is a means of strengthening the bond between a father and child, and “fathers play a particularly important role in the development of children’s openness to the world.”<sup>18</sup> Fathers tend to play more actively with their children; spend more time proportionally than mothers do playing with their children; and—particularly for boys—become the playmate of choice as motor skills develop.<sup>19</sup>

This is not to discount or diminish the role of mothers, but to highlight the balancing role of fathers for children: “Children seem to need to be stimulated and motivated as much as they need to be calmed and secured, and they receive such stimulation primarily from men, primarily through physical play.”<sup>20</sup> It seems that men “have a tendency to excite, surprise, and momentarily destabilize children” and “also tend to encourage children to

take risks, while at the same time ensuring the latter's safety and security, thus permitting children to learn to be braver in unfamiliar situations, as well as to stand up for themselves."<sup>21</sup>

In short, fathers, as well as mothers, are essential to the formation of future citizens capable of self-government. For example:

[Quality father-child rough-and-tumble play permits children to develop] the ability to deal with and resolve conflict situations with peers in a socialized manner without either resorting to the use of aggression or avoiding situations that cannot always be resolved through cooperation and sharing, skills which are especially vital in highly-competitive industrialized societies like our own. This would be of particular importance for boys, who tend to be more impulsive and more aggressive than girls.<sup>22</sup>

Children (as well as adults) have passions that need to be tutored, and the habits of self-government are all the more important for a republic that depends on a virtuous citizenry.<sup>23</sup> Play is just one of the ways fathers contribute to this goal.

While dad deprivation is disastrous for both boys and girls, it is often more so for boys. Human beings learn a great deal through mimicry. We are bodily creatures, and theoretical arguments about masculinity, femininity, and virtue are often not as palpable, detailed, or informative as the lived witness of their mastery. Among the innumerable ways, both tangible and intangible, that boys learn how to become good men is by observing and imitating a good man, who provides guidance and the instruction of his example. A boy's first and primary mentor is his father. Sadly, we have waged war on male role models in and across so many sectors of society: fatherhood, educational curricula, male-only spaces or programs like Boy Scouts, and media portrayals, which are crucial for boys.

Male mentorship opportunities have become even more critical with the breakdown of the family. For single mothers, being able to look to male relatives, other fathers in their community, priests and pastors, and male teachers to serve as role models for their sons is a tremendous source of support. Single moms and dads make immeasurable sacrifices for their children; their road is a tough one, and loving parents do the best they can. Their circumstances vary (never married, divorced, widowed) and are sometimes not of their choosing, as divorce can be a unilateral decision. There are steps a father can take to mitigate the impact of divorce or be deliberate in his involvement following separation.<sup>24</sup> For example, living within 20 minutes of his children can aid regular interaction.

While acknowledging these complexities and the fact that averages and trends do not always apply to the individual, we must also affirm that fathers and men are indispensable and that fatherhood apart from marriage is challenging as a practical matter. For example, “when unmarried couples live together when their child is born, by the child’s third birthday, 40 percent of those children will have no regular contact with their dad for the next *two years*—between ages three and five.”<sup>25</sup> Parents need to be able to trust (and like) each other to form the character of their children, and that trust is often broken by divorce. Only “12 percent of divorced parents are able to create friendly, low-conflict relationships after divorce,” and 50 percent of middle-class divorced couples engage in open conflict.<sup>26</sup> When it comes to the family, there will always be numerous deviations from the ideal, but that does not justify dispensing with the ideal and constructing an entirely new form.

There are some signs of hope, however. While couples are breaking up for less serious reasons than in the past, according to Professor of Sociology and Director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia Brad Wilcox:

[T]he good news is that the divorce rate is falling, which means the share of children being raised in an intact family with their father is ticking up. We’re also seeing the share of nonresidential dads who are staying in regular contact with their kids rising. Finally, even though fathers do not spend as much time with their kids as moms do, today’s residential fathers are markedly more engaged with their kids than was the case in the last century.<sup>27</sup>

Fundamentally, because dad deprivation is the primary driver of the boy crisis, the story of the boy crisis is the story of the breakdown of the family—just as, in turn, resolving the boy crisis is key to renewing family formation.

## Breakdown of the Family

There are multiple ways to describe the evolution of family breakdown in the United States, not all of which can be discussed in this paper. Welfare policies, no-fault divorce, and the proliferation of the birth control pill, which helped to normalize hook-up culture, have all done considerable damage. In the realm of ideas, society as a whole no longer promotes marriage as a permanent promise that provides stability in the rearing and education of children. Marriage has been psychologized, turned into a source of emotional satisfaction. This philosophical shift has precipitated and is reinforced by laws pertaining to the family and marriage and has a foothold in religious institutions.



Economist Dr. Thomas Sowell has demonstrated how the welfare state helped to advance the breakdown of the family:

The proportion of black children being raised by a single mother in 1960 was 22 percent. Thirty-five years later, that proportion had risen to 52 percent being raised by a mother alone, 4 percent being raised by a father alone and another 11 percent being raised with neither parent present—altogether, 67 percent of all black children. By 1995, the proportion of black children in poverty-level families who were being raised without a father present was 85 percent. While it is true that the proportion of black children being raised without a father present was higher than the proportion of white children being raised without a father, even before the great expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s, for neither race was that proportion anywhere near what it became after the expansion of the welfare state. During those very same post-1960s years, the proportion of *white* children living with only one parent suddenly soared to several times what it had been for decades prior to 1960.<sup>28</sup>

Many Progressive Era welfare policies created perverse incentives. Only children living in a household without a father were eligible for certain types of financial aid. “For many years,” as social worker and social welfare policy scholar John Hansan notes in his history of the programs, “this limitation of the federal–state public assistance programs contributed to the phenomenon of fathers voluntarily leaving a family so their children could receive public assistance.”<sup>29</sup> Progressives tended to think they could eliminate poverty if only the government could find the right formula and balance of policies. That pursuit has never ceased. Instead, it has created new, intergenerational cycles of poverty.

Now, decades later, welfare policies have shifted the cultural views of marriage, especially among the poor. In *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*, Princeton Professor of Sociology Kathryn Edin and Saint Joseph’s University Professor of Sociology Maria Kefalas tell the stories of 162 low-income single mothers they met in the late 1990s.<sup>30</sup> The authors note that these mothers place a high value on motherhood and children and almost never refer to the incentives of the welfare system as their motivation for having children outside of marriage.

This evidence is consistent with the harmful effects of the welfare state. Welfare policies encouraged fathers to exit their homes. After several generations, such policies created a culture hostile to *marriage* but not to childbirth per se. Edin’s and Kefalas’s case studies are multifaceted but paint a picture of having children before marriage as the norm: That is simply

how things are done even if the original impetus for this shift is not known or referenced.

Many of the women from the study indicate that they would like to get married at some point but want to have their economic ducks in a row beforehand: have a stable income, money for a nice wedding, and be in a position to purchase a house. These remarks match the analysis of Johns Hopkins University Benjamin H. Griswold III Professor Emeritus of Public Policy Andrew Cherlin in *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*. According to Cherlin, marriage has become a capstone rather than a cornerstone of life. In addition to desiring to be economically stable before getting married, couples view marriage as a status symbol, an indication that they have successfully reached adulthood.<sup>31</sup> In a sense, marriage marks the end of a fun and exciting life rather than the beginning of an adventure filled with both meaning and effort. We see this attitude reflected in the soulmate paradigm.<sup>32</sup> Modern individuals view marriage as the culmination of dating, the end of a quest to find the right person rather than the work and accomplishment of a lifetime.

Cherlin's analysis is particularly rich because he focuses on how attitudes toward marriage have shifted, primarily because of changes in American law and religion. In many ways, it complements the work of Dr. Carl Trueman. Both rely on the compilation *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, which depicts various understandings of individualism, including expressive individualism, within the United States. Expressive individualism is a self-focused emphasis on personal happiness and "self-actualization" as well as a claim that the internal self is the true self. Trueman details expressive individualism's connection to the sexual revolution and transgender ideology, while Cherlin demonstrates how it has impacted marriages.

Though its intellectual roots reach much farther back, expressive individualism really took hold in the American consciousness around the 1950s (in some ways, the women's movement is a manifestation of this broader development):

[Expressive individualism is] the kind of individualism that involves growing and changing as a person, paying attention to your feelings, and expressing your needs.... [M]arriages are harder to keep together, because what matters is not merely the things they jointly produce—well-adjusted children, nice homes—but also each person's own happiness.<sup>33</sup>

Psychologist Sigmund Freud had elevated the importance of sex, claiming it is central not only to human motivations, but also to the identity of

the individual. Following that elevation, a single marriage is made to do some heavy lifting and should be (almost the exclusive) source of emotional satisfaction and personal fulfillment.

Many of us would see happiness as a legitimate goal of marriage, but the happiness that expressive individualism promotes is psychological and subjective, not grounded in an immutable human nature. Psychologist Abraham Maslow, who developed the needs hierarchy, for example, placed self-actualization at the top. Revealingly, “[f]or Maslow, the ‘process of becoming a person’ is contingent either on instinctual drives or on autonomously determined, subjective individual choices, instead of on goods ordered to a metaphysical final cause or a real end, purpose, or *telos* that may be rationally grasped.”<sup>34</sup>

While love and happiness are legitimate ends of marriage, happiness is better understood as living in accordance with virtue, as articulated by Aristotle, and love, as demonstrated by Saint Thomas Aquinas, as willing the good of the other. Ideally, each spouse freely pours out and sacrifices himself or herself for the marriage. This type of happiness within marriage is not personally focused and not always pleasurable in the fleeting sense, as inculcating virtue is at times painful and requires a great deal of deliberative effort. Every day, spouses check their anger, put the other person first, and forgive frustrations for the benefit of an entity above themselves: for the good of the marriage.

If, alternatively, marriage is individually centered and aimed toward maintaining a level of constant emotional satisfaction rather than goodness, it can be justifiably dissolved once it no longer promotes personal development. This line of thinking is reflected in the divorce reforms of the 1960s and beyond. In 1969, California became the first state to institute no-fault divorce. Laws both mirror and develop cultural norms, and no-fault divorce undermined the view that marriage is permanent:

Several recent studies...confirm what common sense suggests: Change in divorce law did increase the divorce rate. No-fault divorce laws may account for somewhere between 15 and 25 percent of the increase in divorce that took place in the seventies. In other words, while there are many social and economic factors conspiring to weaken marriages, no-fault divorce laws have pushed us over the edge from being a society in which the majority of marriages succeed to one in which (according to demographers' estimates) a majority of new marriages will fail.... When the law treats divorce as a unilateral right of one partner, culture can hardly take seriously the moral claims of marriage.<sup>35</sup>

Following divorce, children are often deprived of their fathers, especially as custody laws historically have tended to favor mothers (a complex issue, most especially when it comes to infants).

Behind these legal changes were simultaneous and prompting shifts in American churches. Certain theologians, some even before the passing of no-fault divorce, expanded the criteria that justified divorce; many mainline Protestant denominations began to allow for remarriage after separation; and Catholic annulments became more frequent.<sup>36</sup>

In *The Marriage-Go-Round*, Cherlin shows how American religion pivoted from a spirituality of dwelling to a spirituality of seeking. Americans began to shop for a church that would further their personal growth. Individuals do not form the body of a religious inheritance with a long family and human history; they are customers who find a new church once their old church no longer caters to their personal preferences. The “spirituality of seeking” fit into and reinforced a society of expressive individualism that undermined marital stability:

The spirituality of seeking was not about laws or doctrines but about finding a style of spirituality that made you feel good, that seemed to fit your personality. Just so, the individualized marriage was not about rules and traditions but rather about finding a style of family life that gave you the greatest personal rewards.... Both the spirituality of seeking and the individualized marriage became part of the larger project of developing your self-identity, a quest that became the focus of personal life for more and more Americans during the last several decades of the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup>

The boy crisis is part of the culture of radical autonomy, precipitated by and encouraging a dearth of relationships. It is fundamentally a downstream effect of the breakdown of the family, understood both as a lack of family formation and as the separation of families. The most effectively targeted solutions to the boy crisis will place preserving and forming marriages, families, and communities at their center.

## Education

Although fatherlessness is the primary culprit behind the boy crisis, the structure of the American education system and education policies contribute their fair share. Both long-term trends and short-term policy shifts have undermined boys’ ability to succeed academically.

On average, boys tend to have more energy than girls, and it is difficult for them to sit still for long periods of time.<sup>38</sup> Many are not organized or “well-behaved” and draw the ire of their teachers, who often factor good behavior into their grading.<sup>39</sup> Boys get suspended at much higher rates and “on average receive harsher exclusionary discipline than girls for the same behaviors.”<sup>40</sup> Three out of four teachers are women, and the notion that men and women are the same and that society forces them to become different gained momentum during the sexual revolution. It is an idea promoted by institutions of higher education—the institutions that educate the educators. Steeped in such theories, some teachers expect the girls and boys in their classrooms to act exactly the same. This can lead certain teachers to treat boys as if they are malformed girls.<sup>41</sup>

Behavior problems predict lower education attainment and affect boys’ attitudes toward schools. It is likely that dad deprivation has a cyclical relationship with the education system. Dads tend to enforce boundaries strictly, cultivating impulse control, which is a beneficial skill for the classroom environment.<sup>42</sup> Boys without fathers can come to school with behavioral problems, and “[f]ather-absence may thwart fathers’ ability to interrupt the pathway between behavior problems and low educational attainment.”<sup>43</sup>

In general, boys’ brains simply do not develop as quickly as those of girls; as Brookings Institution Senior Fellow in Economic Studies Richard Reeves writes, “[t]he parts of the brain associated with impulse control, planning, future orientation, sometimes labeled the ‘CEO of the brain,’ are mostly in the prefrontal cortex, which matures about 2 years later in boys than in girls.”<sup>44</sup> Many boys fall behind early, particularly in reading, and struggle to make up ground. Some check out entirely. “Reading and verbal skills strongly predict college-going rates,” writes Reeves, “and these are areas where boys lag furthest behind girls.”<sup>45</sup>

In many ways, the American public education system is not equipped for boys. It is modeled after the Prussian system, meant to be efficient and industrial. Desks are aligned in sterile classrooms, and as “learning in most schools is based on the ability to sit still for extended periods and learn passively, boys start school with behavior problems and have more difficulty learning.”<sup>46</sup> Boys are forced to be immobile even as studies indicate that many learn best kinetically.<sup>47</sup> As a response to their antics, rather than revisiting our education structure and policies, we are increasingly medicating boys. One of every five young men has been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, and 30 percent–50 percent of adolescents in drug rehabilitation centers have used Ritalin.<sup>48</sup>

While boys have long struggled in school, the average person now spends more time in the classroom, and the knowledge economy has raised the stakes of getting an education. According to Heritage Foundation education experts Jay Greene and Lindsey Burke:

The modern concept of adolescence was an invention of the industrial age. As parents shifted their workplace from the farm or trade shops to the factory, they could no longer have children accompanying them. Schooling had already been widespread in the United States to ensure basic literacy, but it was extended to higher grades to provide custodial care while parents went to work, as well as to cultivate the skills required for an industrial economy.

The extension of schooling occurred gradually, with most Americans at the beginning of the 20th century finishing after the 8th grade. As late as 1940, fewer than a quarter of people over the age of 25 had a high school diploma, and only 38% of those between the ages of 25 and 29 did so.... By 2021, schooling had been dramatically extended. Now more than 90% of people over the age of 25 have a high-school diploma, and more than two-thirds of those between the ages of 25 and 34 have received at least some post-secondary education.<sup>49</sup>

With the lengthening of school comes overcredentialing, which has worsened over time with economic shifts and the diluting of a rigorous high school education. An unintended effect has been the stigmatizing of blue-collar jobs and equation of success with going to college. The Industrial Revolution brought massive prosperity, and countries that are more prosperous and educated tend to have fewer children later in life, making those children more valuable. Parents pour more into and pay more attention to their children.<sup>50</sup>

The pressure of getting a child into a prestigious university has intensified, causing the prioritizing of academic standards over developmental standards in schools. Since the early 2000s, schools have been minimizing recess time. The average weekly recess time has declined by 60 minutes since 2001, and children are assigned more homework and at an earlier age than in the past.<sup>51</sup> This is not an equitable tradeoff, as the benefits of homework in elementary school are smaller and sometimes even decrease achievement.<sup>52</sup> In addition to harming children's physical health, a lack of exercise undermines their emotional and cognitive development.

As detailed above, play is crucial for children's growth, and child-directed play with peers is important for forming citizens capable of self-government and deliberation. Through play, children learn how to negotiate and resolve conflict among themselves. The invitation is: "If I can play with you, I can

adapt my actions and reaction to yours.” And with practice, the response can be that “[e]ventually, perhaps, we can share the same perspective, and use the fact of that sharing to work cooperatively towards a common goal.”<sup>53</sup> The trend away from embodied free play and interaction is not exclusive to schools. Since “the 1970s, children have lost about 12 hours per week in free time, including a 25 percent decrease in play and a 50 percent decrease in unstructured outdoor activities, according to another study.”<sup>54</sup>

While it is not explicitly about the boy crisis, in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression President Greg Lukianoff and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt persuasively describe the shift in parenting styles from free-range parenting to helicopter parenting that tends to happen in developed nations. The safety culture in America has come to predominate despite decreases in crime and child kidnapping over the past three decades.<sup>55</sup> As Christina Hoff Sommers analyzes in *The War Against Boys*, zero-tolerance policies (automatic and severe punishment for infractions) became popular in the 1990s as attempts to combat a seeming surge in youth crime and concern over school shootings. While there was no evidence that such policies worked, they did harm boys, who “today bear the burden of several powerful cultural trends: a therapeutic approach to education that valorizes feelings and denigrates competition and risk, zero-tolerance policies that punish normal antics of young males, and a gender equity movement that views masculinity as predatory.”<sup>56</sup>

These educational policies and attitude shifts reflect the triumph of expressive individualism. The dismissal of the importance of the body allows for and encourages an emphasis on mental over physical development and achievement. Expressive individualism claims that the mind and the body can be separated: that they do not interact with and form one another. It is therefore hardly surprising that society has undercut free play and movement, assuming it has no relation to cognitive development, enhanced concentration, and the fostering of skills that are not merely physical, such as the ability to negotiate and compromise.

Further, Rousseau’s philosophy that man is born innocent and good and is then negatively influenced by society underlies both expressive individualism and the progressive approach to education. Rousseau “radically transformed the very meaning of moral virtue. Instead of the classical notion of inducing the curbing restraint of reason into inclinations, [he] reconceived virtue as liberating innate inclination from the restraints or exploitations of alien authorities.”<sup>57</sup>

Progressive education, relying on Rousseau’s romantic vision and promulgated by reformer John Dewey and others, is child-centered, contending

that children should discover themselves and their interests and drive their own educational trajectory based on personal preferences.<sup>58</sup> It de-emphasizes the role of teachers, structure, discipline, and standards, and there are indications that this has been particularly harmful for boys.<sup>59</sup> As Christina Hoff Sommers writes:

Throughout most of human history, children learned about virtue and honor by hearing or reading the inspiring stories of great men and women. During the 1970s and 1980s, the practice was replaced by practices that suggested to students that they were their own best guides in life. This turn to the autonomous subject as the ultimate moral authority is a notable consequence of the triumph of the progressive style over traditional directive methods of education.

It is hardly coincidental that, “[t]he moral deregulation that the progressive educators called for took hold in the very decades that saw a rise in conduct disorders among boys in the nation’s schools.”<sup>60</sup>

## The Workforce

In *Men Without Work: America’s Invisible Crisis*, American Enterprise Institute political economist Nicholas Eberstadt details how prime-age working men have been exiting the workforce since 1965. Employment rates do not capture men who have entirely given up looking for jobs. Over seven million men are checking out of the workforce, and the level of male workforce engagement is about the same as it was during the Great Depression.<sup>61</sup> In 1960, the labor force participation rate of prime-age men (25–54) was 97.2 percent, and in 2022, it was 88.6 percent.<sup>62</sup>

Reading skills are particularly important nowadays; boys fall behind early in our education system, and the gap widens as the years go on. The men who graduate from schools at or near the bottom of their class (if they graduate at all) have been left floundering in the knowledge economy.

The lack of male workforce participation is primarily a problem of men without much education.

Between 1973 and 2015, real hourly earnings for the typical 25–54 year-old man with only a high school degree declined by 18.2 percent, while real hourly earnings for college-educated men increased substantially. Over the same period, labor-force participation by men without a college education plummeted. In the late 1960s, nearly all 25–54 year-old men with only a high school degree participated in the labor force; by 2015, such men participated at a rate of 85.3 percent.<sup>63</sup>



It is also disproportionately a problem among young men, as “the decline in participation of young men (age 16–24) from 1997 to 2017 accounts for almost one quarter of the decline in the overall participation rate, or about triple their current share of the population.”<sup>64</sup> Trends do not seem to be moving in a good direction for young men: The biggest decline in the past three years has been among those ages 20–24. From February 2020 to December 2022, the labor force participation rate of men ages 16–24 decreased by 1.99 percentage points more than was expected relative to pre-existing trends.<sup>65</sup>

Men who excel at and desire physical work over office work have always existed, but their opportunities have diminished over the past several decades. The American economy has shifted from a manufacturing to a global knowledge economy, and traditionally male-dominated jobs have disappeared because of technology and automation (the main driver) or have been shipped overseas.<sup>66</sup> Previously, men without much education could earn a living in manufacturing or, as Ethics and Public Policy Center Fellow Henry Olsen has astutely analyzed, enter the military. Following the Cold War, however, the United States significantly decreased its military force. In the early 1960s, more than 2.7 million Americans were in uniform compared to 1.5 million in 2016.<sup>67</sup> Those serving in the military, who often lacked a high school degree, were given discipline, a skill, and sometimes a career. The modern military, which now requires those who enlist to have a high school degree and pass a cognitive test, is much smaller and more proportionately female.<sup>68</sup>

Many of these economic phenomena are not equally dispersed across the nation but instead are concentrated in select communities. Regions that were previously made up of manufacturing, steel mill, or mining towns are now sometimes “job deserts” where the rate of growth is low or declining.<sup>69</sup> Those who are living on welfare are often disinclined to move because the welfare is tied to their residency.

Part of the story of these select communities is the devastating impact of the opioid crisis (though it certainly does not affect only these communities) and incarceration rates. There was a per capita increase of 356 percent in sales of prescription opioid medication between 1999 to 2015, during which time the number of overdoses quadrupled.<sup>70</sup> Men account for almost 70 percent of those deaths.<sup>71</sup> It appears that 43 percent of the decline in male labor force participation from 1999 to 2015 could be due to opioids.<sup>72</sup> Scholars have also pointed to the increase in incarceration rates as a reason for men’s disengagement from the workforce. Between 1970 and 2000, the U.S. prison population rate rose from 0.1 percent to 0.5 percent, and “each

additional year behind bars reduced post-release employment propensity by 3.6 percentage points.”<sup>73</sup>

Male participation in the workforce is also tied to family structure—further evidence of the reinforcing mechanisms and complicated overlaps between aspects of the boy crisis.<sup>74</sup> For many, male achievement is driven at least in part by the hope of having a family and is then maintained by the obligation a father feels to build an environment in which his children can thrive.<sup>75</sup> That hope has diminished for many men (and women) as marriage rates have declined for low-income men. Overall, workforce participation and marriage rates are closely tied, and “the proportion of never-married men was over three times higher in 2015 than 1965.”<sup>76</sup>

To make ends meet, many men out of the workforce are either living with another family member or “significant other” who provides the majority of the household income or relying on disability payments.<sup>77</sup> In 2015, over 25 percent of white males and 40 percent of blacks ages 25–34 lived with at least one parent.<sup>78</sup> Disability insurance also seems to create perverse incentives that discourage prime-age men from participating in the workforce, as those who fall just short of the requirements have a participation rate that is 40 percentage points higher than the rate for those who barely qualify.<sup>79</sup> In addition, the definition of disability has expanded to include those who are “functionally” disabled:

At least one disability condition was reported for 40 percent of nonparticipating prime age men with a high school education or less. The most commonly reported disabilities were “difficulty walking or climbing stairs” and “difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions”; about half reported multiple disabilities.<sup>80</sup>

Many men who have checked out of the workforce seem dejected and listless. Few of them, for example, are out of the workforce because they are pursuing an education or caring for children. Five out of six prime-age men give reasons other than a lack of jobs for their disengagement.<sup>81</sup> Some have hypothesized that increased deaths of despair (deaths from suicide, overdose, etc.) “among less-educated middle-age Americans might be rooted in ‘a long-term process of decline, or of cumulative deprivation, rooted in the steady deterioration in job opportunities for people with low education.’”<sup>82</sup> Men who have exited the workforce spend more time than working men and women or unemployed men gambling, using tobacco and drugs, listening to the radio, and doing arts and crafts.<sup>83</sup> Almost half of them take pain medication daily.<sup>84</sup> Finally, many are whittling away their energies by numbing themselves in front of screens.

## Technology

Not all screens are created equal.<sup>85</sup> Some of the effects of screen time are problematic because of the content (like pornography and much of social media), but all screen time is detrimental insofar as it removes individuals from the real world. It promotes the expressive individualism tenet that we are disembodied selves.

The amount of time men not in the workforce are spending in front of screens is staggering. Non-working men spend an average of 5.5 hours per day watching television and movies.<sup>86</sup> The allure of video games has increased as they have become more engaging and addictive. Hours spent in front of a screen are hours spent not engaging in another activity. From 1981 to 1997, “time spent in any kind of play went down 16% overall, and much of the play had shifted to indoor activities, often involving a computer and no other children. This kind of play does not build physical strength and is not as effective at building psychological resilience or social competence.”<sup>87</sup>

In the modern era, screen time also includes online pornography, which is having a disturbing and disquieting impact on our boys. Pornography use is so widespread that when one group of researchers sought to conduct a study of its effects, “they were unable to find enough men in their twenties who had *not* watched porn to form a control group.”<sup>88</sup> According to some, Gen Z boys are exposed on average at the age of nine, and the *British Journal of School Nursing* reports that “children under 10 now account for 22 percent of online porn consumption under 18.”<sup>89</sup>

Much of this is predatory. Nearly 80 percent of children between the ages of 12 and 17 have seen pornography unintentionally.<sup>90</sup> A *Wall Street Journal* investigation into TikTok (a Chinese-owned company) revealed that the app “pushes hundreds of sexually explicit ads to teen users as young as age 13, including links to sites depicting hard core porn.”<sup>91</sup> Boys are becoming addicted to online pornography before their brains and capacity for self-control are fully developed. They could be addicted for 20 years or more before establishing a serious relationship, and there is quite simply nothing human beings do consistently for 20 years that has no impact on their bodies and psyches.

The evidence is piling up that addiction to pornography is harming the physical and mental health of boys and men, as well as the condition of relationships between men and women. It saps men’s spiritedness, and studies have found links between “porn and high stress, social anxiety, romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance, narcissism, depression, anxiety, aggressiveness, and poor self-esteem.”<sup>92</sup> Men addicted to online pornography tend

to be more aggressive and to have negative attitudes toward women. Perhaps most disturbingly, it changes their perception of what is normal and rewires their brains, causing them to seek more and more novel content rather than a relationship with a woman:

Porn is a sexual stimulus, but it is not sex. Notoriously, heroin addicts eventually lose interest in sex: this is because their brains are rewired so that their sex reward system is reprogrammed to seek out heroin rather than sex. In the same way, as we consume more and more porn, which we must since it is addictive and we need more to get the same kick, our brain is rewired so that what triggers the reward system that is supposed to be linked to sex is no longer linked to sex...but to porn.<sup>93</sup>

Online pornography is inhibiting young men’s ability to form attachments, as could spending so much time in the online world in general. Social finesse is a matter of practice, and those in the social media generations sometimes avoid face-to-face spontaneous interactions. Men are in the midst of a “friendship recession” with 15 percent of men indicating that they have no close friends.<sup>94</sup> Especially since #MeToo and the shaming of in-person approaches on platforms like TikTok (incidents that, while not necessarily common, receive elevated attention), men who introduce themselves to women outside of a dating app can be perceived as creepy. It is therefore no surprise that many report being single because they are not good at flirting.<sup>95</sup> The preeminence of the virtual world is making it more difficult for young people to interact face-to-face and establish real relationships—which leads us back to the family.

## Future Family Formation

While boys and men are struggling mentally, physically, academically, and economically (and, by some measurements, have been doing so for several decades), women are ending up without partners. Women tend to be hypergamous, desiring spouses that are as successful and educated as themselves or more so; for example, women are 91 percent more likely to “swipe right” on Tinder when a man has a master’s degree than they are when a man has a bachelor’s degree.<sup>96</sup>

The educational achievement and income of Millennial men have not kept pace with those of Millennial women. According to psychologist Jean M. Twenge’s *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America’s Future*,

“Every single penny of the rise in younger adults’ incomes is due to women’s incomes.”<sup>97</sup> In 2016, 46 percent of working Millennial women who were 25–29 years old had at least a bachelor’s degree compared to 36 percent of their male cohort.<sup>98</sup> Young men and women are struggling to connect, and many men, particularly less educated men, have been left without relationships.<sup>99</sup>

Of course, the lack of interaction between men and women has implications for birth rates, which have declined with the generational shift from Gen X (born 1965–1979) to Millennials (born 1980–1994).<sup>100</sup> Data scientist Stephen J. Shaw offers the insight that the primary driver of falling birth rates since the 2008 recession is not that women are having fewer children, but that the number of women who never become mothers has climbed.<sup>101</sup> Many of the men and women Shaw interviewed indicated that they always envisioned having children but thought they had more time and were caught unawares. The technologies of the sexual revolution and beyond have convinced men and women not only that they can avoid conceiving a child, but that nature can be more fully conquered so that adults can have children at the exact desired stage in life. About 80 percent of childless women wanted children and struggled to find a partner and/or encountered fertility issues. At least part of this is tied to the shrinking pool of eligible men (and their physical health) that the boy crisis has left in its wake.

## Purpose and Hope

One of the most troubling aspects of the boy crisis is despondency and lack of purpose. The boy crisis has not been adequately addressed (Somers’s *The War Against Boys* was published over 20 years ago), and men are sometimes told they are unnecessary and toxic, which only contributes to their sense of despair. According to Houston Christian University professor and scholar in residence Dr. Nancy Pearcey in *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes*, the roots of the toxic masculinity narrative go all the way back to the Industrial Revolution. In 1830, the average American drank three times as much as he does today, the number of taverns skyrocketed, and the temperance movement and novels rose to respond to the problem of fathers spiriting away the family income.

A study by historian Callum Brown found that “a large proportion of evangelical stories about men centred (sic) on the destruction of families by male evils.” The plots were predictable: Women’s problems were the result of men who were drinkers, gamblers, abusers, and womanizers. As Brown concludes,

“Nowhere did evangelical literature have such a powerful influence in the public domain...as in its demonization of men.”<sup>102</sup>

Such attitudes (which were reactions to a real issue) have proliferated, evolved, and sharpened with the rise of identity politics. Today, positive portrayals of men are few and far between. While girls are told “the future is female,” boys are offered little encouragement. Men, far from being deserving of love, to some are inherently toxic, poisoned by the testosterone that shapes their development in-utero and beyond.

These are disheartening mantras, to say the least. Aside from the more extreme arguments, to dismiss the financial sacrifices men make for their families or contend that men are valuable simply for the sake of their economic utility is to miss something fundamental. Women and men have things to learn from one another. We have even been known to love each other and the children we raise together. Individuals and society would be poorer without the affection and friendship of our sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers.

Nor is the defeatist malaise limited to boys and men: It reflects how we as a country and the West at large have lost our way. According to a recent Harvard Graduate School of Education report, 58 percent of young adults say that they lack meaning or purpose in their lives, 44 percent indicate a sense of not mattering to others, and 34 percent are lonely.<sup>103</sup> The radical autonomy of expressive individualism, rather than an immutable relational understanding of the human person, now occupies our moral imagination. Combatting both the boy crisis and the crisis of the West is in no small measure a matter of rooting people within families and communities and encouraging them to take on more, not less, responsibility.

In formulating solutions, we would do well not simply to theorize, but rather to observe and search for signs of hope within our culture. On the education front, parents have become very vocal about their children’s formation. School choice, classical schools, and Montessori schools are experiencing a resurgence and offer new and hopeful ways to address the boy crisis.<sup>104</sup>

Broader signs include the remarkable rise of Dr. Jordan Peterson and the eminence of Bishop Robert Barron. Both have millions of followers even though they often do not tell people what they want to hear in the sense of justifying any behavior or opinion. They emphasize that individuals need to work on becoming more virtuous and treat religion as the serious business it is rather than as a passing obligation that requires little sacrifice and devotion. Theirs is a countercultural message against expressive individualism, yet it has resonated.

While Dr. Peterson has been a source of insight and goodness for many, he particularly attracts young men struggling to discipline themselves and

develop a road map for their lives. According to Peterson, his vision program helped ethnic minority males to earn 44 percent more credits and decreased their dropout rates by 54 percent.<sup>105</sup> His advice is both commonsensical and profound, encouraging and tough, and compels young men to rise to the challenge of what they are capable of becoming. It is an invitation of hope for those who are combating their own anxiousness, an inducement fortified with the knowledge that encouragement stands as the counterforce to anxiety.

Bishop Barron has offered a cogent diagnosis of what went wrong within the Catholic Church.<sup>106</sup> The Church grew concerned that parishioners were leaving and believed this was because it had become inaccessible to the modern individual. Priests were prompted to be more relatable, to tell anecdotes and stories in their homilies instead of emphasizing heady doctrinal questions. As a result, knowledge of and belief in doctrine diminished, the exit from the Church grew exponentially, and other ideologies like identity politics rose to fill the gap. Signs of hope today are that Bishop Barron has millions of followers, the *Bible in a Year* podcast with Father Mike Schmitz was one of the top downloaded shows for most of 2021, and young people seem drawn to the traditional Latin mass.<sup>107</sup>

Both Dr. Peterson's and Bishop Barron's messages are fitting for the cultural moment. Our current environment calls for the repairing of the innate strands between rights and responsibilities and among happiness, freedom, and living a virtuous life. Those in the Western world are so fortunate when it comes to economic prosperity and the protection of human rights (though some, like freedom of speech, are under attack), yet so many are committing suicide. In the landmark book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah and others write about how freedom has been degraded to license:

[I]nfluenced by modern psychological ideals, to be free is not simply to be left alone by others; it is also somehow to be your own person in the sense that you have defined who you are, decided for yourself what you want out of life, free as much as possible from the demands of conformity to family, friends, or community. From this point of view, to be free psychologically is to succeed in separating oneself from the values imposed by one's past or by conformity to one's social milieu, so that one can discover what one really wants.<sup>108</sup>

In other words, the modern individual is disconnected from everything that gives human beings purpose and direction. We are now witnessing the effects of experimenting with these ideas, discovering that it is dangerous to take all the sacrifice and hazards out of life. Instead of promoting radical

autonomy as a pathway to flourishing, we would be better served by coming up with solutions geared toward developing virtuous citizens. And rather than trying to invent new things to give men (and women) purpose, those solutions should turn to what is beyond the individual and for which human beings have always been willing to die: God, family, and country.

## God, Family, and Country

There is a place for policy prescriptions that involve renewing America's churches. It is essential to halt the war on freedom of conscience, to allocate to religion the place it deserves in the public square. The three primary inlets to truth are philosophy, theology, and science, and we do a disservice to our society when we ignore any of them.

However, most of the revitalization of the church will come from within, from the efforts of leaders like Bishop Barron to engage more seriously with doctrine, particularly by articulating and propagating the theology of the body. As Dr. Carl Trueman argues:

The church's teaching on gender, marriage, and sex is a function of her teaching on what it means to be human. The doctrines of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation are important foundations for addressing the specific challenges of our time. If, as I have argued in this book, modern sexual and identity politics are functions of deeper notions of selfhood, then we need first to know what the Christian view of the self is in order to address them.<sup>109</sup>

The damaging philosophy of expressive individualism, which divorces the mind and the body and separates sex from gender, feeds the boy crisis, causing dad deprivation through the breakdown of marriage and dismissal of the importance of fathers. It encourages education policies that treat boys and girls as identical and merely minds. The theology of the body combats all of these falsities.

Religious institutions also have a vital role to play in the renewal of marriage and family. According to a report by *Communio*, shockingly, 85 percent of all churches in the United States spend nothing annually on marriage and relationship ministry. This is a cyclical relationship, as "the collapse in marriage and the resulting decline in resident fatherhood may offer the best explanation for the decline in Christianity in the United States."<sup>110</sup> If churches are falling short of prioritizing marriage and offering and promoting an aspirational vision of it, why should society take marriage seriously? And how do we prevent the alternative capstone view, which is based in the psychological self rather than a principled



understanding of the human person, from taking hold? The church must offer a positive conception of marriage when so many individuals come from broken households. Children of divorce, even as adults, sometimes have a negative perception of marriage, are unsure of what to prioritize when looking for a spouse, or struggle to communicate through conflicts in a healthy manner.<sup>111</sup>

When religious institutions are strong, families, which are another source of meaning, tend to be strong. In considering solutions to the boy crisis, we must open pathways for individual male accomplishment by correcting education policies and developing matching skills for dignified work. Doing so offers a sense of identity, purpose, and vocation.

While crucial, however, professional success is a means to an end for some, since male achievement is often tied to familial aspirations, and not the primary source of purpose for many. As Dr. Nancy Pearcey highlights, according to a Harvard University study:

[T]he most important factor in male happiness and health was not fame, wealth, social class, or professional achievement. Overwhelmingly, the key factor in male health was close, loving relationships. Men were created for relationship.... To be a committed husband and father does not contradict men's authentic nature but fulfills it. Even single men can be "fathers of the community" by making disciples and mentoring younger people.<sup>112</sup>

Policy advocates tend to think of women when it comes to work–life balance, but 70 percent of fathers indicate they would take lower pay in exchange for more time with their families. Ultimately, the purpose for which men are searching is found most often in relationships, including fatherhood, and emphasizing this is all the more critical in the midst of the loneliness epidemic and narratives about "toxic" masculinity. As Pearcey states, "The most important long-term solution to toxic male behavior...is to strengthen men's commitment to fatherhood.... Men report that having close relationships with their children is a powerful validation of their sense of manhood."<sup>113</sup>

Many have noted that having children is an act of hope. It is a basic indicator that citizens consider their civilization worthy of perpetuation—but it is not the only one. For the past two years, despite America's reduced military force, the army has experienced a recruitment crisis. As discussed above, some of this is due to a decline in physical and mental health and the altering of military standards. More philosophically, however, the civic nature of the military has changed. In 1970, the Gates Commission unanimously

endorsed a volunteer force, and “[d]ispensed with—or at least devalued—in those first pages was the long-held traditional belief that each citizen has a moral responsibility to serve his country.”<sup>114</sup> According to a recent *Wall Street Journal* poll, patriotism is on the decline, and “[t]he only priority the Journal tested that has grown in importance in the past quarter-century is money.”<sup>115</sup> Today, four out of 10 Zoomers contend that the Founding Fathers can be more accurately described as villains than heroes.<sup>116</sup> There is no place for heroes in Rousseau’s pedagogical vision.

Why should men (and women) strive to be dutiful citizens or be drawn to the valor of fighting culturally and physically for their country when we no longer know and cannot recount why it is worth defending or the remarkable-ness of our origin story?

America and the West have a rich and compelling inheritance if only we could articulate it. By doing so successfully, we will encourage modern Americans to occupy their moment in the continuity of gratitude and obligation that extends back to the Founding generation and forward to Americans yet unborn, not only for the sake of America, but for her people. The gratitude and responsibility that citizenship requires are of a curious kind. Their giving and assumption does not lessen us. It makes us stronger and more virtuous. It invites us to be part of something that transcends our very person. Now, more than ever, individuals need to be brought out of themselves to the beauty of the divine, enduring, and encompassing.

## Conclusion

The crisis of men and boys shows up at each stage of life: boyhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Dad deprivation is the primary cause, though education policies and economic shifts have contributed in exacerbating and unique ways. Men and boys are struggling mentally, physically, academically, economically, and spiritually.

The solutions to the boy crisis will be far-reaching and multitudinous, including policies that may not immediately seem obviously relevant to the boy crisis:

- Promoting school choice and classical and civic education;
- Disrupting the accreditation monopoly;
- Reforming colleges and universities;
- Increasing vocational and apprenticeship programs;

- Invigorating mentorship and single-sex activities and spaces;
- Renewing positive media portrayals and societal respect for men and fatherhood; and
- Establishing and revisiting age-appropriate curtailments on technologies, drug policies, welfare and disability regulations, and family law.

Reponses that focus only on the second educational stage or third economic stage will often come too late.

Perhaps most essentially, addressing the boy crisis must include fostering and revitalizing our nation's churches, a culture that supports family formation and stability, and the American national character. The boy crisis is not merely a political problem. It is also a spiritual one: a want of purpose brought on by the rise of expressive individualism.

We would do well to consider the boy crisis as nested within the broader crisis of America and the West. When addressing these crises, our goal should be to reestablish the strands between rights and responsibilities and among happiness, virtue, and truth. Solutions will need to root individuals more within community and country, combating the atomization and loneliness that leaves so many bereft of purpose.

The disembodied promise of radical autonomy was always a false one. This paper has focused on the boy crisis, but both men and women have paid a heavy price for the expressive individualism that cuts across our immutable human nature, families, and country. Breaking its hold and the cycle of the boy crisis will ensure that we do not deliver its debts to our children.

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