Restoring the Future: Building Support Systems for Boys and Young Men
Lucas Ortiz

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across America, boys and young men have been falling behind socially, behaviorally, and academically due to a lack of strong male representation and formation. This formation once came from families, schools, churches, and male youth organizations. Today, these institutions are becoming increasingly ineffective at developing boys into the men and citizens they are called to be, and capable of becoming. This brief will examine the roots of this developmental crisis and explore actionable solutions to restore the structures that help boys grow into virtuous, capable men.

II. OVERVIEW

In recent decades, boys and young men have fallen behind across several key measures of success, including education, mental health, and civic engagement. These trends are visible in areas like crime, suicide, and education rates. These challenges are paired with the decline in male formative institutions like families, churches, and male mentorship networks. These groups that once helped boys become the best men possible are seeing a decline in their prevalence and their efficacy, leaving boys to define manhood without reliable guidance. This capstone will examine the root causes of this developmental crisis and evaluate how public policy can support the renewal of male formation.

A. Relevance

Masculine formation refers to the social and moral development of boys into mature, responsible men, a process traditionally supported by families, religious institutions, school, and civic organizations. For generations, this process was guided through strong father figures, mentorship from male teachers, clergy, church leaders, and community/youth organizations like the Boy Scouts. Today, many of these institutions have weakened or disappeared. The decline of strong male role models, especially in homes and schools, has left many boys without clear guidance, structure, or a vision for manhood. This lack of guidance contributes to higher dropout rates, substance abuse, violence, and a worsening mental health crisis among young men. Without strong formation, many boys drift. Some turn to unhealthy role models online. Others fall into apathy, addiction, or anger. The data reflect this: boys are more likely to drop out of school, suffer from depression, or get caught up in violence. This is not just a personal issue — it's a societal one. If we want strong men in the future, we must start forming them today. Many boys are left to determine manhood alone, often leading them on destructive paths, which harm society, whether that be from an increased crime rate, or simply a lack of strong leaders.

III.   HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Up until recently, boys were formed into men through overlapping social institutions, including fathers/families, churches and faith-based groups, schools, and civic organizations. Each in their distinct ways worked to teach discipline and virtue, provide models of male leadership and responsibility, and offer boys a smooth transition from boyhood to manhood. In recent decades, these institutions have weakened or disappeared. Fewer boys grow up with access to a strong father figure or male mentors, participation in teaching and youth formation has declined, and youth organizations have changed focus or lost relevance. This, along with a social rejection of masculinity, has led many young men down dangerous paths for themselves and society as a whole. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2022) 1 in 4 children live without a biological, step, or adoptive father in the home. This is dangerous for girls and boys alike, but particularly boys. A father figure is extremely important in the formation of young men; without it, boys are left to navigate the transitions from boyhood to manhood alone, often with negative influences. This fatherlessness has been shown to lead to an increased risk of poverty, school failure, and crime. Youth groups oriented toward the formation of strong men have proved successful in the past. One of the most prominent being the Boy Scouts. Today, a decreasing number of young men are Boy Scouts because the organization seems to have shifted its focus away from forming strong men who will benefit society. This is most notable by their decision to allow girls into the Boy Scouts. This decision to allow girls into an organization ordered toward the development of men has led to a decrease in its efficacy and a detrimental effect on young men and society.

IV.   POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders of this issue are boys and young men themselves, particularly those impacted by a lack of positive male role models and formation. When young men are lacking this integral part of their formation, they are more likely to drop out of school, struggle with identity and emotional control, become incarcerated, or commit suicide. Without consistent role models, young men are left to define manhood on their own or from bad influences, leading to the aforementioned consequences.

Strong, responsible men contribute to healthy marriages and stable families–both of which directly benefit women. Especially daughters who benefit emotionally and socially from involved fathers. Fathers set the standard for their daughters in future relationships. Girls with strong relationships with their fathers are less likely to experience teen pregnancy or early sexual activity, among other bad lifestyle choices and unintended consequences. Women are also heavily impacted by strong men. Having a strong man in the household leads to a healthier marriage and assistance in raising and forming children, especially boys. This issue does not just impact boys and young men. When boys become strong, responsible men, women, girls, families, and society as a whole benefit.

B. Risks of Indifference

If this problem remains unaddressed there will be a continued rise in male dropout rates, crime rates, depression and suicide, as well as fatherlessness passing on to the next generation. If boys and young men continue to lack strong male role models they will be left to accept harmful influences and have no strong guidance in their formation as men. This lack of strong men has a ripple effect on society, leading families to become more unstable, women and children bearing more of the burden, and the economic cost of unproductive or incarcerated men. By not addressing this issue society is not only experiencing direct negative impacts but also missing out on the many good effects of strong men, such as, leadership, stable fatherhood and families, and productive men who build communities. This is not a niche issue, it is fundamental to a flourishing society. Every year that the issue is ignored, the cost and damage rises.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

This is not a partisan issue, but a human one. No matter your demographics, all members of society benefit when boys grow into strong, responsible men, and it is imperative that nonpartisan intervention takes place. The benefits of such an intervention include, but are not limited to the following:

1) Strengthening of families: boys who grow into responsible, emotionally healthy men become, better husbands, fathers, and more supportive sons and brothers. These strong men are more likely to build stable marriages, which leads to lower divorce rates, more secure children, and less strain on single mothers. When men are strong and responsible it leads to a healthier family dynamic, and most importantly reduces the likelihood that sons will grow into irresponsible men. It only takes one good man to break the cycle of negatively formed men.

2) Improved education and mental health outcomes: boys who are guided by good mentors, stay in school longer, are more likely to succeed academically, and are less likely to experience poor mental health. This makes classrooms safer and more productive for everyone regardless of their sex, and addresses an increasing mental health crisis.

3) Reduction of crime and public safety burdens: boys with strong male role models are less likely to join gangs or commit crimes and are more likely to resolve conflict peacefully and respect authority. This lowers costs for law enforcement, juvenile justice and incarceration, while also simply improving society.

Strengthened economy and workforce: properly formed men are more employable and responsible, can hold stable jobs, and contribute positively to businesses and communities. These positive effects of responsible men reduce dependency on welfare systems and boost productivity.

V. Tried Policy

This issue has not been completely ignored. There have been various efforts to combat it,

however, most did not entirely solve the issue.

In 2014, the Obama Administration implemented My Brother's Keeper. This program focused on opportunity gaps for boys and young men of color, who are statistically most at risk of lacking strong role models. The program raised awareness to the issue, while funding local mentorship and education initiatives. However, it lacked a moral or character formation component, long term federal funding and scale, and became decentralized after the Obama presidency.

Another policy initiative is the National Fatherhood Initiative, which focuses on reconnecting fathers with children, mainly for economic support and parenting. This initiative is strong, in that it supports family reunification and offers some skills and employment training. However, it focuses on fathers and not boys and young men, and does not address masculinity or male formation at the developmental stage. While fatherhood is an important aspect of young male formation, this initiative did not directly help form boys.

Finally, likely the most well-known initiative for the formation of young men, the Boy Scouts. Founded in 1908, it aimed to develop young men into ethical and moral leaders, instilling values of service, courage, and self-reliance. While this program is arguably the most successful male formation program, in recent years it has begun to decline as it strayed from its founding mission. Boy Scouts was created for the development of young men and was historically very successful. However, in an attempt to enhance its inclusivity by permitting girls into Boy Scouts, the organization lost much of its efficacy in forming strong men. Participation is another reason why the Boy Scouts has had a decreasing influence on forming responsible men. In 1972 the Boy Scouts had 6.5 million members compared to only 762,000 in 2020. This large decrease in membership made the Boy Scouts influence on forming young men nearly non-existent.

While these efforts ought to be commended, they are mostly unsuccessful in combating this issue because of various issues such as, missing the core issue of masculine identity and formation, being too narrow in their scope, or lacking funding and public support. I.

POLICY OPTIONS

Expansion of community-based male mentorship programs

Mentorship helps fill the gap left by absent fathers, giving boys someone to model character, purpose, and emotional maturity, while helping to prevent negative peer influence or isolation.

To combat the issue of fatherlessness, I propose public grants for community nonprofits that run male mentorship programs. Schools can partner with local churches or men's groups to form these groups. A vetting/training process is important as it will ensure that mentors are reliable and aligned with values that will benefit young men and society. This proposal is flexible and can work across urban, suburban, and rural settings.

Incentivization of male teachers and coaches

Only 24% of K-12 teachers are male, leaving many boys and young men without strong male

role models. Boys need to see and learn from responsible male role models in leadership roles to influence them to mature into strong men as well.

In order to correct the lack of male K–12 teachers I recommend incentives to bring more men into teaching and youth work, especially in elementary and middle school. This can be done through loan forgiveness programs for men who become teachers or youth workers, scholarships for men studying elementary education or youth development and pay stipends for after-school leadership. This gives men a path into meaningful, service-based careers while also serving a broader societal need.

Support of rites of passage and moral formation programs

Historically, many cultures had formal "rites of passage" to mark the transition from boyhood to manhood. These rites build identity, confidence, responsibility, and character. They give boys a challenge that is healthy and meaningful.

This can be implemented on a state level by granting funding for existing church/civic led formation programs. It can also be implemented on a city level through leadership camps for boys, hosted by community centers. Public schools can also partake in the development by hosting programs on character and virtue formation, through the guidance of city councils and school boards. This approach will restore a cultural tradition with proven social value, while also using modern approaches.

VI.   Conclusions

Boys and young men today are growing up

without the guidance, structure, and formation they need to become strong, responsible men. This is due to several factors like, increasing fatherlessness, lack of mentorship, and cultural confusion. This issue is not just personal, while it certainly affects men, more broadly, it impacts families, women, schools, and society as a whole. This issue impacts these areas through rising crime, broken families, and emotional instability.

To reverse this trend, mentorship must be invested in, male leadership in education and youth groups must be restored, and support for moral formation programs must be increased. When boys are formed into good men, everyone benefits. This is a bipartisan cultural and policy opportunity that cannot be ignored.

References

[1] Reeves, Richard V. *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It.* Brookings Institution Press, 2022. https://www.brookings.edu/books/of-boys-and-men/

[2] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBSS)*, 2021. https://www.cdc.gov/yrbs/index.html

[3] Pew Research Center. "America's Growing Gender Gap in Education." *Pew Research*

Center, 4 May 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/05/04/americas-growing-gender-gap-in-education/

[4] United States Census Bureau. "Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years Old: 1960 to Present." *U.S. Census Bureau*, 2022. https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/children.html

[5] Institute for Family Studies. *The Strength of Father's Involvement in Boys' Lives*. 2022. https://ifstudies.org/ifs-admin/resources/reports/strengthoffathersfinal2.pdf

[6] National Center for Education Statistics. "Characteristics of Public School Teachers." *NCES*, 2022. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/clr

[7] Obama Foundation. "My Brother's Keeper Alliance." *Obama Foundation*, https://www.obama.org/programs/mbk/

[8] Australian Government, Department of Social Services. *National Strategy for Young Australians: Mentoring for At-Risk Youth*. 2020. https://www.dss.gov.au

[9] Wilcox, W. Bradford, and Wendy Wang. *The Millennial Success Sequence: Marriage, Kids, and the "Success Sequence" Among Young Adults*. American Enterprise Institute, 2017. https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-millennial-success-sequence/

[10] University of Oxford, Department of Education. *Mentoring and Role Models in the Lives of Young Men: A Global Perspective*. 2018. https://www.education.ox.ac.uk

[11] The Fatherhood Project. "The Importance of Fathers in Child Development." *Massachusetts General Hospital*, https://www.thefatherhoodproject.org

[12] Boy Scouts of America. "Scouts BSA Transition FAQ." *Boy Scouts of America*, 2018. https://www.scouting.org/about/faq/