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OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Boy Crisis of 2025, Meet the 'Boy Problem' of the 1900s

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The authors are social theorists who have long studied the roots and consequences of inequality.

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In the early years of the 20th century, America had a "boy problem." Boys on the street, making trouble. Boys becoming truants. Boys getting caught up in crime. The problem spread across the United States alongside the disruptions of technological change, immigration and growing socioeconomic inequality.

Policymakers stepped in — with universal public schooling, for example. But it was the civic response that was truly extraordinary. In less than a decade, most of today's major child-serving organizations were founded: Big Brothers (1904), the Federated Boys' Clubs (1906), Boy Scouts (1910), Girl Scouts (1912) and 4-H (1912).

Many boys and men are struggling today, too, in an America once again disrupted by technological change, immigration and growing inequality. Since 2010, suicide rates among young men have risen by a third — they are now higher than they are among middle-aged men. The share of college degrees going to men has fallen to 41 percent, lower than the women's share in 1970. One in 10 men aged 20 to 24 is effectively doing nothing — neither enrolled in school nor working. That's twice the

rate in 1990. This crisis demands a response equivalent to what the Progressive era delivered, not just in public policy but equally important, from our civic institutions.

Today's leaders have been slow to recognize the extent of male troubles, in part because of a fear of being seen as somehow anti-woman. But alarm bells are ringing.

Gov. Gavin Newsom of California just signed an executive order that was hard to imagine a few months ago. It offers a comprehensive plan to tackle what it describes as "California's growing crisis of connection and opportunity for men and boys." Mr. Newsom said the order was "about showing every young man that he matters and there's a path for him of purpose, dignity, work and real connection."

Similar pushes have been announced by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, Gov. Spencer Cox of Utah and Gov. Wes Moore of Maryland. (One of the authors of this piece, Richard V. Reeves, is working on these plans with many of these same governors.)

This male malaise is not just about jobs and diplomas. It is also a crisis of connection, as men and boys are increasingly detached from civic, familial and social life. They are lost, in part because they are lonely: 25 percent of boys and men aged 15 to 34 told Gallup they had experienced loneliness "a lot" on the previous day. One in seven young men reports that he has no close friends, up from 3 percent in 1990. Two thirds of men under the age of 30 think that "no one cares if men are okay."

Consider the despair implicit in that last statistic.

Too many boys and young men are unwoven from the fabric of our society. In sociological terms, they lack social capital. This is dangerous for them and for everyone else. These lonely, detached young men can become susceptible to reactionary voices, mostly online, who turn legitimate suffering into dangerous grievances. But it's important not to confuse the symptoms with the cause, which is disconnection.

This is not a novel pattern driven solely by social media. Hannah Arendt learned from Nazi recruiting in the 1930s that with the breakdown of established social and political structures, lonely, socially isolated young men are vulnerable to totalitarian ideology and appeals to violence.

But it is not all their fault. For too long, mainstream institutions have failed to acknowledge and address the real challenges facing boys and men. They don't need more wagging fingers. They need helping hands.

Doing more for boys and men does not mean doing less for girls and women, of course. There is plenty of work to do, for example, in tackling the gender pay gap, increasing the representation of women in leadership roles (especially in big tech) and widening access to reproductive health care. As all the politicians leading on this issue correctly insist, gender equality is not a zero-sum game. We can do two things at once. We can take better care of girls *and* boys.

"Our mission to uplift men and boys isn't in conflict with our values to leave no one behind — it's in concert with them," Mr. Moore declared in his 2025 State of the State address. "As the father of a son and a daughter, I want both of my children growing up with all of their God-honoring and God-given opportunities."

There is a certainly a large role here for public policy: more male teachers, more apprenticeships, male-friendly mental health services, longer paid leave for fathers. But this is also a civic crisis requiring a civic response.

Early in the 20th century the "boy problem" generated sensational media and cultural anxiety. Civic and political leaders worried about roving hordes of uncivilized and lawless boys who ran the streets and caused a ruckus.

Industrialization had boomed in the decades after the Civil War, especially because of rapid technological change — expanded train and electrical systems, and phones, cars and the rest. For the upper classes, these changes heralded an age glittering on the surface but corrupt underneath, as Mark Twain characterized the

Gilded Age. But social problems also soon accelerated, as captured in 1890 in Jacob Riis's shocking photographs of destitute immigrant slum dwellers on the Lower East Side in "How the Other Half Lives."

Among the attendant consequences of industrialization were rapid urbanization, rapid immigration and a rapid increase in inequality and poverty. The fraction of Americans living in urbanized areas virtually doubled in the half-century from 1870 to 1920. In 1850 less than 10 percent of Americans were foreign-born; in the next five decades of immigration, that number increased by nearly half again. In many major cities, immigrants and their children constituted three-quarters of the population. The top 1 percent's share of national income nearly doubled, to nearly 20 percent in 1913 from less than 10 percent in 1870. Never in American history had our economy and society been so explosively and painfully transformed.

Especially among the poor, immigrant and working classes, these changes disrupted family life, leaving parents overworked, ineffective or absent altogether. Many had neither the time nor the linguistic skills to help their kids navigate this unfamiliar environment. Many saw their authority undermined, while others were simply unable to cope with their children. Almost equally disruptively, community ties in impoverished immigrant neighborhoods withered. A team of pioneering social scientists in Chicago reported that these children lived in "socially disorganized" spaces, areas of what we would now call low social capital.

For all of these reasons, working-class boys became isolated from their communities, though not necessarily from one another. A 1930 survey reported that 14 percent of boys living in cities spent every evening away from home, compared with 5 percent of rural boys. In some Chicago immigrant neighborhoods, 30 percent of the boys were on the street every night.

The inevitable result: gangs, juvenile delinquency, violence and general disturbance. The culture into which these young men — children, really — were inculcated was the culture of their peers. Peer culture encouraged masculine toughness. "Sissy" was the ultimate slur. Peer norms stressed physical prowess

and aggression, taking risks and taking things. These delinquent cultures emphasized what the sociologist Elijah Anderson would much later term “the code of the street.”

It’s true that the new problems affected young men of all social classes, but they were much worse among working-class kids, and it was on them that the growing number of Progressive era reformers focused their efforts. Some of these century-old innovative responses (like orphanages) now seem antiquated, but others (like special education) are remarkably timely.

Public-policy reforms were prominent, especially in the field of education. Reformers had several objectives — saving the boys themselves, of course, but also cutting crime and fostering good citizenship. (Some of the reformers were motivated by ethnic and religious prejudice, but most were primarily not.) They began with compulsory education and a higher school-leaving age. But many boys resisted those reforms, swelling the numbers of truants and then truant officers.

As Julia Grant, the pre-eminent scholar of the “boy problem,” writes: “With a growing recognition that boys of the dangerous classes would not be easily corralled into schools, reformers created new spaces that would provide greater opportunities for boys to be redeemed through the expression of their boyish natures.”

If the public reforms proved disappointing, the civic response yielded groundbreaking successes. The boom in child-serving organizations we mentioned at the outset, from Big Brothers to Boy Scouts, took hold. The Y.M.C.A. had a half-century head start but expanded rapidly during this period, including with a nationwide campaign starting in 1909 to “teach every man and boy in America to swim.”

Why did these new clubs actually work? Across America, tens of thousands of worried adults suddenly realized that they could do something practical about the youth crisis in their own towns and cities. Take the case of the Boy Scouts, founded in Britain, whose membership would rise steadily for more than half a century after its establishment in America in 1910. For reformers hoping to attract kids to a

setting that would improve their deportment, the Boy Scouts represented a nifty blend of fun (hiking and outdoor games) and moral education (the endlessly repeated Scout Oath, pledging to be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind and so on). Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts, echoing the industrial language of the era, described it as a "character factory."

Athletics and recreational facilities were another common approach. Organized youth team sports proliferated, with new gyms, pools and extracurricular activities. In 1891 in Springfield, Mass., James Naismith, a religiously inspired social reformer seeking a sport that could be played indoors year-round with minimal equipment and few injuries, invented basketball. Five years later in Boston, social activists borrowed an idea from Germany and laid out the first public playground; by 1906 the Playground Association of America had been founded.

The forerunner of the American Camping Association was established in 1910, and summer camps nationwide multiplied tenfold to 1,000 in 1918 from 100 in 1900. In the late 19th century, proclaiming "muscular Christianity," churches and other religious institutions helped lead the struggle for the soul of American youth, often borrowing from their British counterparts innovations like the Sunday school movement, the Salvation Army and the Young Men's Christian Association.

Crucial to all of these civic innovations were mentors, especially male mentors — scoutmasters, coaches, pastors, Big Brothers and the like. In our own day, when mentoring for have-not kids (both formal and informal) has reached levels below that available to their more comfortable classmates, contemporary social science has shown beyond doubt that mentoring matters and its value can be measured. It improves school attendance and school performance and reduces substance abuse.

More than a century ago, reformers recognized that the most effective solution to the boy problem was to build civic institutions and spaces where men could help boys to navigate their way successfully to a mature, pro-social manhood. That is a lesson that needs to be relearned for our own times. As former President Barack Obama said recently, "As a society, we have to create more structures for boys and

men to have guidance, rituals, frameworks, encouragement." He went further, suggesting that the men in our communities are vital assets who can act as a "sort of elders to boys, so they're not just looking at one particular role model, but many."

It takes a village to raise a child. But some of the villagers must be men.

This is where civic institutions should come in, providing places and spaces where boys and young men learn what it means to be a grown man. But in 2025 they are struggling to fulfill that role, for two main reasons.

First, there are simply fewer organizations with an explicit mission to serve boys and men. Most of the ones formed during the last boy crisis have gone coed, sometimes as a result of a merger. Most now serve more girls than boys. An exception is Boys and Girls Clubs, which renamed itself in 1990 and still serves a slightly higher share of boys (55 percent) than girls.

In other cases, previously male-serving institutions have gone coed while their sister organizations have remained single-sex. Boy Scouts no longer exists, having rebranded as Scouting America after the controversial decision to admit girls. Of the roughly one million scouts in the movement today, around 20 percent are girls. But there are also more than a million girls in Girl Scouts, which remains a single-sex organization. All told, there are 50 percent more girls than boys in scouting.

The Y.M.C.A. banned gender discrimination in 1978 and now has a mission to support the well-being of all children, young people and the wider community, regardless of gender. Most Y.M.C.A. members are female, and more than two-thirds of Y.M.C.A. employees — including, strikingly, all six senior executives — are women. Most volunteers are women, too. On every measure, then, the Y is now a female-oriented institution. (The Y.W.C.A. remains a single-sex organization with an explicit mission to empower women.)

The gradual abolition of organizations devoted to serving boys and men has been a result of a laudable drive for inclusion and perhaps a sense that single-sex environments are archaic or even harmful. But it is naïve to think that a society bereft of male-centered institutions is the ideal one for helping boys to become

good men. Indeed, there is some suggestive evidence for positive outcomes for boys attending single-sex public schools, like Eagle Academy in New York, for example.

Second, there is a dearth of male volunteers, making it harder to provide services for boys and young men. Only 20 percent of young 4-H volunteers are men. And there are almost twice as many women as men signing up to be a mentor through Big Brothers Big Sisters. As a result, there are almost twice as many teenage boys as girls on the waiting list for a mentor — and they will wait much longer, in some cases for up to a year. This further widens the opportunity gap between boys and girls, since having a mentor is associated with a remarkable 10 percent rise in college enrollment.

Organizations are beginning to respond. Big Brothers Big Sisters has partnered with the N.F.L. to promote the Big Draft, which encourages volunteering among men. This year there was a 7 percent increase in men of color signing up to be a mentor. Would-be male mentors have told the organization in focus groups that they also want the chance to connect with other men, resulting in a shift toward more group-based mentoring approaches.

Historically, sports have provided boys with structure, mentorship and camaraderie, often in a single-sex environment, especially as all other extracurricular activities skew toward girls. But the share of high school-age boys playing sports has declined to 41 percent in 2023 from 50 percent in 2012, according to one estimate. Among lower-income boys, the share has dropped to 25 percent. Financial barriers are one factor, with the rise of “pay to play” travel teams and similar offerings; but another is a relative lack of male coaches.

One hindrance to male volunteering is the fear of being seen as a potential predator. This has also reduced the enthusiasm among some parents for single-sex environments. The abuse scandals that rocked the Catholic Church and Boy Scouts understandably led many parents to worry about their children in male-oriented organizations. The settlement for claims against the Boy Scouts has reached $7 billion, more than the annual expenditure of many U.S. states. But the attention to

child safety in these organizations is now paramount. The fear of child abuse in these organizations is similar to the fear of child abduction from playing without parental supervision — perfectly natural but potentially damaging if it overly restricts the activities of children and young adults.

The challenges facing boys and men today may appear very different from those of a century ago. The trouble is more likely to come from an algorithm than an alleyway. But the results are comparable. The school system is struggling to keep boys engaged. Wages have stagnated for men without college degrees. Marriage rates have collapsed in lower-income communities. Job growth is in female-skewed sectors like health care. And the need to provide more social scaffolding for our boys and young men is just as great. We have too many lost boys. Many are in desperate need of positive male role models.

At the same time, men in their 20s and 30s are now at a higher risk of being socially isolated than their female peers. Many are hungry for a sense of purpose and for opportunities to contribute to society. Getting more men serving as mentors, coaches and tutors to boys is not just about improving the lives of those they serve but also about giving their own lives more structure and meaning.

A century ago, men stepped up to build spaces for boys and were cheered on for doing so. The need today is just as urgent. We have boys seeking guidance. We have men seeking purpose. We have civic institutions desperate for male volunteers. We need to match the outpouring of civic energy, institutional innovation and readiness to experiment with risky new ideas that marked the "boy problem" reformers a century ago.

In short, today's boy crisis demands a new call to men — and for men to answer that call.

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