

*Confused and isolated, young men are struggling now more than ever. It's time for us to...*

# Stop ignoring the 'Boy Problem'

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When he was four, Ken cried about losing a card game. His father's immediate response: "You're a man. Men don't cry." This mentality stuck with him. In ninth grade, when Ken, not his real name, failed multiple tests in a row, he refused to express his anger and insecurity. Later in high school, he discovered alcohol provided an escape.

"After that, I would always give in to that feeling whenever things got hard," Ken said. Eventually, he learned to resist the temptation. For millions of American men, however, the cycle continues.

This "boy problem" has become an increasingly prevalent aspect of modern society. Today, men are twice as likely as women to report excessive alcohol use and three times as likely to die due to drinking. The vast majority of those arrested are male, especially in cases of burglary and violent crimes like murder and aggravated assault. Eighty percent of those who die by suicide are male.

In 1970, 57% of men received bachelor's degrees. Today, that number is 42%. Meanwhile, female undergraduate students receive almost 60% of all degrees, according to the Education Data Initiative. In high schools nationally, boys perform worse in school, making up two-thirds of the bottom 10% but only one-third of the top 10% in GPA.

This trend stems most notably from the stigma around men's mental health. Societal expectations of masculinity discourage men from expressing their emotions, leading to unhealthy mindsets and behaviors.

When Jake Davis stepped up to home plate for the first time at age nine, the very first pitch hit him right in the nose. As he fell to the ground in tears, his dad ran over to him and said, "Shake it off, and run to first base."

"I know that he loves me very much, but I was also being given the message that crying and being sad wasn't okay." Now an Upper School counselor, Davis recognizes that his father was raised in a culture that expected boys to be "mentally tough."

It's a story Ken knows all too well. "My father always taught me that men only cry about two things: one is actual pain, and the other is something damn important enough, like the loss of a close friend," Ken said.

In a 2024 AP Statistics project, seniors Elizabeth Patton and Morgan Raizner asked St. John's upperclassmen boys whether a movie ever made them cry. When asked in person, only a quarter of respondents said yes, but when answering anonymously

online, that number rose significantly to 55%.

Junior Samuel Caruso, a responder chair for Students Against Stigma, points out that the expectation for men to conceal their emotions is exacerbated by the nature of most male friendships.

"In simple terms, girls discuss and boys distract," Davis said. "Neither of those is a bad thing – discussing is a way of processing that helps calm our nervous system, while distracting by doing something to find joy helps us get through difficult moments."

The tendency for men to distract from their emotions explains why only 7.2% of men seek therapy compared to 11.7% of women, according to a CDC survey. Licensed counselor Thomson Ivins, who spoke to St. John's seniors in October about mental health and drug use, says men either do not want to admit they need help or "learn to deal with it."

Ivins says men overgeneralize their worries, attributing their problems to stress because it's an "easy umbrella term" that often masks an inner "anxiety, lack of self-confidence, loneliness or not feeling like enough."

**Upperclassmen boys are more than twice as likely to admit to crying during a movie if asked anonymously rather than in person.**

Because of their tendency to overgeneralize, many boys struggle with learning how to handle their feelings and instead lash out. "When I was younger, if I was sad, it would come out as angry. If I was stressed, I was angry," senior Coltan Blossom said.

Technology is another cause of the recent increase in social isolation among boys. Since 2012, the year when Facebook acquired Instagram and more than half the world's population had cellphone access, in-person socialization has dropped significantly while depression and loneliness have increased sharply.

The global pandemic only worsened this loneliness epidemic. Today, one in four U.S. men ages 15-35 report feeling alone – more than any other group. This age demographic also represents a majority of social media users.

Without a community to ground them,

many young men seek connection online via the "manosphere" and discover influencers that crudely promote misogyny, racism and homophobia. Male influencers such as Andrew Tate, Adin Ross and Sneako, many of whom originally gained fame in traditionally male fields such as sports and gaming, have become more political and now contribute to the mass indoctrination of young men.

In 2023, almost a third of young American men considered Andrew Tate a role model, according to market research company Savanta. Tate, a kickboxer-turned-influencer, currently awaits trial for multiple criminal charges, including sexual assault and human trafficking.

"We can start getting connected to some really radical voices," Davis said, cautioning that such influences could lead to toxic behaviors.

## HIS-STORY

In a recent in-depth opinion in the New York Times, Robert Putnam and Richard Reeves trace the roots of the "boy problem" back to the Industrial Revolution. Before urbanization, many young boys grew up working on farms, often surrounded by older brothers, fathers and uncles. Industrialization transformed people's occupations, placing fathers in factories and separating young men from their male role models. Some banded together in street gangs as a new form of community, causing society to take action.

Fearing that the lack of framework (and farmwork) was yielding a generation of weak, misguided men, British Lieutenant General Robert Baden-Powell created the Boy Scouts Association in 1908. Putnam and Reeves wrote. Two years later, the movement spread to the United States. Designed to bring boys together under the guidance of male mentors, Scouts promotes arts and crafts, outdoor survival skills, and activities such as hiking and swimming.

Senior Colin Callahan, who participated in Scouts for six years, credits the program with teaching him useful life skills while creating a bonding space.

"It takes a lot of responsibility, which, if you're not mature, is something that you will struggle with at the beginning," Callahan said. "Scouts has led us to be better men."

Scouting today pales in comparison to what it was just 50 years ago, dropping from four million participants in 1972 to roughly one million today. Hampered by a lack of troop leaders, the growing digitization of

youth activities and the fallout from a \$2.5 billion settlement involving thousands of sexual abuse claims, Scouting has lost much of its influence. In 2015, Boy Scouts of America rebranded to Scouts BSA and opened its membership to girls, a change the organization made with the intention of removing gender barriers and promoting greater inclusivity, according to CEO Roger Krone. Yet many national leaders and former Scouts were unhappy that the organization is no longer exclusively for boys.

"We have lost a dedicated space focused on boys' development during a time when mentorship and structure are already declining," Callahan said. Today, roughly 20% of Scouts identify as female.

Other guiding organizations like the YMCA have deviated from their founding missions. These "third spaces" once served as communities beyond home, school or work. Even without an obligation to be there, boys showed up at places like the Y and developed bonds based on social connections.

But that is no longer the case. Modern men find themselves lacking third spaces that provide connection, frequently leaving them isolated and lacking guidance. "When we lose these spaces, the natural impact is a lack of connection and role models, even though these are key to our survival," Davis said.

## BOYS WILL BE BOYS

As students at St. John's, we may feel immune to national trends, but we are no different. On average, boys are outperformed by girls academically. Over the past two years, only one-third of the cum laude honor society inductees were male, consistent with national trends.

In terms of mental development, girls get a head start. According to a study by Newcastle University, the brains of teen girls begin reorganizing connections earlier than those of males, allowing them to mature sooner. By their late teens and early 20s, boys catch up, but their grades may not.

Beyond academics, boys are underrepresented in club leadership. Over the past two years, of the roughly 200 co-ed affinity group leaders, fewer than 30% were male.

Senior Drew Kalapatapu has observed these effects in his extracurriculars. As an editor-in-chief of the Quadrangle, president of Pre-Med Club and a community service officer, he often feels like an outlier among female-dominated leadership.

"In order to get a leadership position, you have to be mature, motivated and heavily involved in an activity," Kalapatapu said. "But that's hard for guys because they don't want to be labeled as too aggressive."

Kalapatapu sees this trend as cyclical: because these club spaces are heavily female, some boys find it "weird" or "less popular" to pursue leadership positions. "I don't know how that started," he said, "but it just keeps on continuing and getting worse."

Kalapatapu says it is easier for boys that go against the grain to rise up the ranks. "My voice becomes an important one. It's a different perspective that maybe isn't present all the time," he said.

One of the most reliable safe spaces for boys is sports, with its mix of camaraderie, physical activity, discipline and healthy competition. The number of boys in high school sports reached a record high last school year – 4.7 million athletes nationwide.

## NOT-SO-QUICK FIXES

When junior Elias Zhang walked into Houston Boychoir eight years ago, he expected to sing. Instead, he spent his time learning how to tie a tie, greet adults, maintain good posture and practice proper meal etiquette.

Carole Nelson followed this strategy for 30 years as the artistic director of the Houston Boychoir. "The small things really help establish a sense of self," she said.

Nelson says schools were not designed for young boys, especially those in kindergarten through third grade. Educators mostly teach verbally and require students to sit still for extended periods of time, a teaching style that is less suitable for boys who tend to be more active and less verbal compared to girls at that age. These tendencies result in boys getting into more trouble and having more difficulties at school.

Behavioral issues may be amplified by the shortage of male teachers, who often model proper social conduct.

Of the Upper School faculty who teach at least one class, only one-third are male, yet nationally, men make up 40% of public high school teachers.

"Studies show when girls are in certain academic classes with boys, they tend to be more demure and not necessarily want to appear too smart," Nelson said. "This becomes a problem for boys over the years with all of the emphasis that's been placed on raising our young women up. Boys have often been left behind."

Nelson suggests that a solution lies in separate gender education, particularly for students in elementary and middle school. Having a safe space where boys can thrive together without the influence of the opposite gender may help them mature.

Daniel Makulski, a senior at Strake Jesuit College Preparatory, an all-boys school, attended the co-ed Annunciation Orthodox School in middle school.

"Going from co-ed to all-boys is probably better for boys' mental health," Makulski said. "A lot less drama takes place. It's easier to focus."

According to Richard Reeves, who founded the American Institute for Boys and Men in 2023, the solution is to encourage people to pursue higher education. A recent survey shows that only 36% of people say college is worth the cost. Encouraging young men to enroll in college would get them out of the house and provide a career path.

Reeves also says that America should reinvest in vocational training programs. These programs, like repairing cars and working with electrical systems, allow young men to learn marketable skills that would create financial stability.

Military service can provide young men with a structured environment that instills discipline and accountability while bolstering mental well-being.

Experts also recommend alternative forms of service. Best-selling author Scott Galloway suggests the U.S. offer civilian service, ranging from working at a dog shelter to a senior center.

Ultimately, Davis says that the first step to solving the problem is to raise awareness and take it seriously.

"It needs to start with our older generation. We need to model vulnerability ourselves. We don't have to stop paying attention to girls' mental health to give attention to boys," Davis said. "It's not a zero-sum game."

## Advice to my younger self

"Don't be afraid to show emotion. Value your relationships and the importance of vulnerability and connection with others."

- Samuel Caruso, junior



"Practice getting comfortable with the uncomfortable. Find [someone] that you feel connected to and practice vulnerability. See how that goes and how that feels."

- Jake Davis, US counselor



"You're always going to have someone to talk to, even if you feel like you can't talk. Feel your emotions, and don't always turn them into anger."

- Coltan Blossom, senior



"Just check in with somebody, ask how they're doing and then shut up. [Give them] space and silence and stay with them. It's just checking in."

- Thomson Ivins, counselor



Whether it's anger or sadness, be comfortable with expressing your emotions. That's a good first step to really seeing how you're doing, what's bothering you, what's making you happy."

- Colin Callahan, senior



"When you're in any sort of position of power, it's very important that you wield it with dignity and purpose and use it in such a way that is for the benefit of all."

- Nathan Kim, Head Prefect

