

CHAPTER 1

American Men on the Sidelines

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation.

—Henry David Thoreau, “Economy”

No one knows my struggle, they only see the trouble.

—Tupac Shakur, “Thugz Mansion”

Twenty to twenty-five million men—the population of Florida or Texas—are on the sidelines of American life.¹ They have the same Y chromosomes as the men you see at work, the men who play with their children, go out with their wives or partners, are involved in their communities, and earn a living to save for their children’s education and their families’ retirement. But these “men out” are doing few if any of these things.

They are still counted by the U.S. Census, but for all practical purposes they are absent from much of mainstream life. What they do doesn’t register in either the gross domestic product (GDP) or in the glimmer of a child’s eye. They aren’t engaged in their communities or country.

Viscerally, we know these sidelined men are out there. But they don’t fit old stereotypes of failure. We haven’t been able to name them or come to grips with who they are. We haven’t identified the problem or its dimensions. Why is this happening? What can we do? We see separate problems like white men who aren’t working, who are angry, whose education ended long before

a bachelor's degree. We see black men whose lives don't seem to matter. We see adult boys living in their parents' basements. We see drug and technology addicts, absent fathers, misogynists. We see men struggling with masculinity. We see men struggling with relationships and marriage and ones with physical and mental health problems. But we don't see a single, larger story.

This is a cultural, economic, and political phenomenon that many have caught glimpses of but no one has defined. It is corroding American life in myriad ways. This problem without a name is fed by and affects the economy and politics, changing norms and technologies, and it bleeds into individual and social psychology and public health, as well as dating, marriage, and fatherhood. As Bob Dylan said, "Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is."

This raises several basic questions: Who are these men, what are their lives like, and what makes them different from the majority of American men, who still navigate life pretty well? What are some of the qualities, barriers, pathologies, and other challenges these men face, and what are the common threads that tie together these various manifestations of dysfunction?

Many men try hard to do the right thing and succeed. Many see the problem in terms of being casualties of economic and cultural change. These men are at least partially correct. Rather than receiving a dishonorable discharge, they have been deported from mainstream America.

In this chapter we begin to explore the following: Who are America's sidelined men? Why is this happening? (And why do often politicized explanations that lean too heavily on cultural factors, on the one hand, or economic factors, on the other, present an unsatisfactory, one-dimensional view?) What does being on the sidelines mean for these and other men, for women and children, for civic life, economic well-being, and everyday life? And is this the future for ever more American men?

WHO ARE THEY?

Sidelined men are a disparate population. Not all men out exhibit all of the characteristics mentioned above and discussed in the following pages. And the extent and the severity of their challenges differ. However, like the overlapping sections of a Venn diagram, all of them exhibit at least some of these qualities.

These men—different in many ways but kindred in ways we generally don't want to admit—cut across demographic categories. The Trump-era ste-

reotype of the laid-off white worker—that is, the former Stakhanovite in bedroom slippers—is but a slice of a bigger, more complex story. Central casting may put them in pickup trucks in Appalachia and the Rust Belt. But the cast is far larger.

Some groups—less educated white men, poorer African American men, young men, single men, and many middle-age men who are still far from the birthdays that will open the doors to Social Security and Medicare—are disproportionately represented. But there are men who at least once were middle and upper middle class, gay men, married men, and Latino men. Some are just trying to begin adulthood; others are well into middle age. Some are ex-offenders, but most have never committed a crime. They are Democrats, Republicans, and independents and are often detached from, disgusted with, and isolated from politics and public life. They can be found in all corners of the nation—from big cities and suburbs to rural areas and small towns. While many do live in Appalachia, the rural South, and formerly industrial areas, a surprising number live in exurbs, suburbs, and cities from Silicon Valley to New England. Not off-the-grid hermits holed up in mountain bunkers, they live next door or in our own homes.

It is impossible to pinpoint their numbers except to say that one-fifth to one quarter of the 100 million or so American males who are between their early 20s and mid- to late 60s exhibit many of the key characteristics.²

Many don't work and either can't find jobs or aren't looking. These out-of-work, often alone men have disembarked from the labor force and other social institutions or have been thrown overboard. Their skills may be out of date and their former salaries too high for a profit-maximizing economy that sometimes gets airbrushed with exciting-sounding words like "competitive," "global," and "digital" but leaves them in the dust. The aging of the population has coincided with age discrimination against ever younger "older workers." And there's an increasing brokenness to their bodies and psyches.

Few are buying homes, and many are more likely to have—or *be*—liabilities than assets. Nor are they paying much in the way of taxes, although they are more than likely drawing on government benefits like food stamps and Medicaid and driving up government spending.³

They generally aren't active in public life. Some younger men lack maturity. Others have become loners or suffer from poor health. They may be angry, or they may just be blank. Many are less than responsible, reliable, and loving fathers, husbands, partners, or workers, even when they do have jobs. A significant number feel they've been mistreated by women, unfair

laws, and an unjust economy. Many drift in and out of relationships, having children with multiple women, prowling the virgin yet hardly virginal terrain of hookups and Tinder. Others who are married are neither good providers nor taking care of the kids and home, letting their wives support them—an embarrassment at best, a costly ball and chain and divorce material at worst. Other sidelined men turn to parents; millions of adult men in their 20s and 30s are back in their childhood bedrooms or basements. Spending all too much time online in a world of video games, social media, porn, and dyspeptic Reddit threads and quasi-fascist corners of the internet, they have largely gone offline from the real world of other, in-the-flesh human beings. They are beyond “bowling alone”; it’s more likely that they can’t find the bowling alley, and if they do, they don’t know what to do with the ball.⁴ Many feel disparaged, rightly or wrongly, which erodes their self-esteem and makes their lives even worse.

Midlife—one’s 40s to early 60s—once was the time when men were at the pinnacle of their careers. They had put in their time, climbed the corporate or organizational ladder, and attained what was likely to be the highest income of their lifetimes. They could support their families and look forward to a secure retirement. If they weren’t genuinely happy or content, at least they had checked all the boxes of middle-class success in the mid-twentieth century. Most still do, and many 25-year-olds are getting good jobs, marrying, and leading good lives, while more than a few 70- to 75-year-olds are hard at work in jobs they love.

The growing population of men out has become a drain on their families and the economy. Whether one sees these men as victims or as responsible for their own circumstances, they not only represent hundreds of billions of dollars in lost potential GDP, as well as tax revenues and increased government expenditures that together help drive up deficits, but they also are a cost to family and friends, who often pay to sustain them.

Are these men victims or are they culprits? The question is fiercely and inconclusively debated, yielding much more heat than light. Neither the left nor the right has a monopoly on this story. For now, let’s sidestep the question and say that most men out are some of both. Regardless, their lives are rimmed with losses, defeats, and sadness.

They aren’t all ne’er-do-wells, but they *aren’t* doing well for themselves, their families, their communities, or their country. They are disappointments to their children, wives (and girlfriends, if they have any), and employers or former employers. They, too, are disappointed, but more than likely they are

hurting—economically, psychologically, and physically. Many are in poverty or in pain, are depressed and isolated, feel shame or anger, and are lost. They comprise millions of personal tragedies, and their collective condition has negative repercussions for the nation. And their numbers seem to be increasing.

Lorne, a middle-age white man in the Midwest who was last employed eight years ago, is angry. Very angry. He hasn't "dropped out" of the workforce, he said emphatically when I spoke with him. "I've been kicked out." Citing, at once proudly and cynically, his two science and math degrees and his career in information technology (IT), he said that he and men like him "are overeducated, overtrained, and overskilled."

Lorne is angry at not only recruiters, women, journalists, and scholars who write about men like him but also society in general. He focuses his ire on what he calls "the deliberate and strategic discrimination in human resources departments, against middle-age white men." The "recruiting industry," a phrase used with scorn, is "female-dominated," filled with "young, single women" and biased against men "to compensate for years of so-called misogyny."

Society is brimming with "hatred" toward people like him who aren't working, he said. They think that such people are mooching off the government. Lorne was quick to note, "The government hasn't given me a dime. I've paid for everything with my own hard-earned savings."

He recounted his efforts to find jobs, telling the story of one potential employer who took him to court for harassment because he sent an indeterminate number of follow-up emails after an interview. "My job-hunting efforts have been criminalized, in the true, literal sense," Lorne said. "You wonder why I gave up looking for work?"

When the subject of available low-wage jobs came up, Lorne said he's not "culturally suited" to working in a pizza parlor or other places where "high school dropouts" and college students taking summer jobs toil. As a former IT worker, he said, his "expectations" are higher.

Lorne is not alone in his bitterness. A lot has gone badly wrong in his work life. Naturally, he has looked for explanations and has come up with a long list of culprits. But having others to blame—rightly or wrongly—doesn't ease his pain. He made a point of saying that he understands why suicide rates among men are up, concluding grimly, "I fully embrace the fact that I will die of starvation when my savings are gone. Bring it on!" Yet men like Lorne are largely out of sight.

WHY ARE THEY INVISIBLE?

Even more than the poor, or people of color, or underpaid workers, or the LGBTQ community, or women, men out are largely invisible. They are unorganized and lack advocates. They have no lobbyists on K Street or grassroots activists to support them. There are no charities for failing men, and very few scholars of gender studies focus on them. While these men out face a host of problems, as do other marginalized groups, most social scientists and the commentariat have put their problems into discrete silos: it's a labor force problem, or a fatherhood and family problem, or an opioid or public health problem, or a political problem.

But there is another significant reason for their invisibility: gender-role norms and shame. Men are supposed to be strong, stoic fighters. If they're not at the top of their game or vigorously competing, they're not in the game. At the same time, our postfeminist culture tells us that women are still largely oppressed, the victims of a patriarchal, sexist society in which men cling to their privilege and too many are likely to be guilty of sexual harassment, if not assault. It follows that if men remain the unjust winners, it's ludicrous or tin-eared to think of them as losers. In general, this story is correct, just like it's true that America is generally a rich country. Yet the United States has many poor and economically struggling people, just as a still male-dominated society has many sidelined, struggling men.

Shame is compounded by another concept that few want to discuss: masculinity. For those on the left, feminists, and many women, the very term connotes retrograde norms and attitudes that are one step out of the cave. For those on the right, many men, and some women, the vague idea of masculinity suggests a positive, tough, in-charge persona. None of these groups has much of a place for struggling men. For a lot of sidelined men, establishing and maintaining a "masculine" identity is just one more cross to bear. Definitions of masculinity are in flux, leaving them confused or angry about how they should play their gender role. The acting coaches have left the theater. This is another key, similarly siloed dimension of the man out problem.

Different dimensions of many American men's problems have been creeping into the headlines and public awareness. However, several key things have been missing from these discussions.

First and foremost, the array of problems has been spliced apart and widely treated as separate issues; connections among them have not been carefully explored. This set of man out issues has yet to be identified as what is in many

ways a single, broader problem. Unfortunately, most economists, social scientists, and advocates who have ventured into this world fail to see the politically inconvenient connections among many subpopulations of men and among different social problems.

The list of those who have entered into parts of this discussion is long: (1) the “men’s rights” types, (2) those on the right denouncing a lost work ethic, (3) worker activists on the left pointing to forty-five years of declining inflation-adjusted median male wages, (4) women decrying irresponsible or misogynistic men, (5) Donald Trump and the Tea Party fanning the flames of hypernationalist discontent, (6) deincarceration supporters, (7) public health leaders seeing disturbing trends in men’s health, (8) those promoting civic engagement and greater comity in public discourse, (9) feminists and progressive men’s groups that want to reduce “toxic masculinity,” (10) family and fatherhood activists, (11) education and workforce development proponents who want to expand opportunities and access for both, and (12) economists and others in public policy who see the costs to the U.S. economy and want to figure out what to do. However, few of these seem to realize that they are often talking about the same men.

Second, economics and politics are key, but despite much populist rhetoric, few people, other than labor organizers and advocates, are truly standing up for men who have been pushed to the precarious margins of the U.S. economy. Which political leaders have taken a stand on, which research organizations have focused on, and which foundations or nonprofits have taken up men’s issues?⁵ Similarly, absent fathers and ex-offenders don’t elicit much sympathy, but many of these men are not being given a fair shake. Politically correct scholars and advocates are generally loath to touch the subject of a “man problem.” As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in the 1940s, who would ever get “the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the American male?”⁶

Third, for those whose focus is on economics, the at least equally influential role of culture and historical changes in norms, values, and mores is rarely spoken in the same breath. The ticklish questions of men’s choices and what choices we as a society tolerate—or have forced or nudged so many people into—have been avoided.

TEN STATISTICS

Ten statistics about ten seemingly unrelated phenomena, when brought together, are intriguingly suggestive of this interlocking story:

- Fewer than seven out of ten American men age 20 and older work; in the 1950s, nine out of ten worked. Just over eight in ten working-age (25–64 years old) men work, compared to nineteen out of twenty in the mid-twentieth century.⁷
- Inflation-adjusted (“real”) wages for the bottom 60 percent of men fell between 1973 and 2016, with the most dramatic declines occurring among the bottom 40 percent, and despite growth during the final Obama years, real median wages for all men were slightly lower in 2016 than at their peak in 1973.⁸
- By the mid-2010s, just half of men were husbands; in 1960 three-fourths of men were married.⁹
- Today, and in the years before Donald Trump became president, only two out of three children had both parents living with them; when John Kennedy was elected president, nine out of ten children did.¹⁰
- In 2015, 35 percent of 18- to 34-year-old American men lived with their parents (compared to 29 percent of millennial women); in 1975 about 28 percent did.¹¹
- There were projected to be 37 percent more women in college than men in 2017–2018, whereas in 1970 there were about 35 percent more men than women in college.¹²
- In 2013 mortality rates among less educated, middle-age white men and women were about 20 percent higher than they were in 1998, life expectancy among American men had fallen in the mid-2010s, and life expectancy for white men in rural West Virginia was more than eight years less than it was in the affluent suburbs of Washington, D.C., 100 miles away.¹³
- Men are about 50 percent less likely than women to trust government.¹⁴
- In the 2016 election there was a 24 percentage point voting gap between genders, with white men being much more likely not only to vote for Republicans but also to express disillusionment and anger toward gov-

ernment; until about 1980, men and women voted roughly evenly for Democrats and Republicans.¹⁵

- Male membership in civic groups—including service organizations like the Masons, Rotary, Elks, and Kiwanis—has fallen by between one-half and two-thirds since the 1960s.¹⁶

The pattern is striking. On a number of these metrics, there has been a similar rate of decline, in some cases more than a 20 percentage point falloff.

Although there are many ways to slice and argue about statistics, and categories often overlap, in 2017 there were more than 20 million nonworking adult American men; 4.7 million men 25 and older working part-time, including 1.4 million men not by choice; 13–14 million young adult men living with parents; about 10 million fathers of minor children who did not live full-time or at all with their kids, including several million never-married fathers; 2 million incarcerated men, 4 million more on parole or probation, and at least 17 million male ex-felons; 15 million hard-core male video gamers; about 12 million men living alone and more than 10 million men who said they didn't have anyone to turn to in a time of crisis; nearly 13 million men who were substance abusers; at least a million men in drug and alcohol abuse treatment centers; 33,000 men who committed suicide; and countless men ranging from the virulently misogynistic to those who felt confused and threatened about their masculinity.¹⁷ These men are all around us.

While it is more socially acceptable for women—particularly mothers—not to work, comparable numbers for women on other metrics paint a very different picture: in 2017 there were about 2 million mothers who did not live with their children; 200,000 incarcerated women; 9,000 women who killed themselves; 6 million women who abused drugs or alcohol; and 10 million millennial women living at home.

Each of these statistics is not necessarily either a damnation or a marker of a man out. Many nonworking men are looking hard for work, and thousands of fathers who don't live full-time with their kids are still good dads. Online gaming can be an engrossing pastime, pharmaceutical companies bear much of the blame for America's opioid crisis, and gender norms must be pretty up in the air when *Time* magazine releases a cover story called "Beyond 'He' or 'She.'" ¹⁸

This is where we once again need to stand back from pat judgments. By

themselves, these numbers don't necessarily mean that American capitalism is ruthlessly amoral or that men are good-for-nothing louts.

What these numbers mean—at least at this point in this book—is that too many men are on the sidelines of American life, not living the kinds of good lives that should be possible in a prosperous, tolerant, fair, friendly, and happy society.

In short, the man out problem has a number of intertwined dimensions in which causal lines run in various directions. The siloed “labor force problem” stems from and stokes degraded values, the growth in economic inequality, mass incarceration, government policies that have hurt working Americans, and internet addiction, among many other factors. So too is the “masculinity crisis” a function of, and contributor to, declining labor force participation, misogyny, and virulent expressions of male anger. America’s “marriage and fatherhood crises” also swirl back into inequality, dwindling values of responsibility, gender-role confusion, and mass incarceration. Growing physical health, mental health, and substance abuse problems among men reflect problems in the labor force and economy, in marriages and male-female relations, and in knowing what it means to be a man.

The problem is multifactorial, some would drily say. It involves a little bit of everything (which at some point becomes a heuristic cop-out). Anyone who argues that men's declining labor force participation can be reversed largely by increasing economic growth or reducing inequality (as if either is easy), that father absence can be significantly reduced by marriage promotion, or that misogyny can be dealt with largely by teaching males a more egalitarian version of masculinity misses the larger issue. None of these, or other problems of men out, can be truly addressed without confronting these multiple factors together.

If an observer from Mars were looking at the Earth in the 1950s or 1960s and asked who was at the top of the global heap in power and opportunity, the answer would have been clear: American men, white men in particular. It is important not to idealize the mid-twentieth century as a time when everything was smooth sailing for men and to gloss over how much worse life was for most women and for African Americans and other people of color, as historian Stephanie Coontz points out in her 1992 book, *The Way We Never Were*. Nonetheless, if that same Martian returned today, it would see a much different picture.¹⁹

Certainly it is true that many women, especially women of color, are still more likely to fare poorly in the United States, despite significant strides

during the last half century. They are grossly underrepresented in government and executive suites. They are shunted into traditional “women’s work” and paid, on average, 20 percent less than men; the differential is less for those in the same jobs, but it still exists, even though well-educated urban younger women are starting to earn more than their male counterparts.²⁰ In many other countries, women have it much worse. In some, mostly northern European countries, women are doing better than those in America.

Variants on men out also have started to appear in western Europe and other developed countries, although adult male employment rates are higher in almost every other rich country than in the United States. Britain has record numbers of “kippers” (kids in parents’ pockets, eroding retirement savings). As in the United States and France, about one-third of Britons under 35 live at home. The figure climbs to more than 40 percent of young Germans and a staggering 65 percent of young Italians. These male *bamboccioni* or *mammone* are not so flatteringly called “big babies.” In Japan the so-called *soushoku danshi*, or “herbivore men,” appear to have little interest in marriage, sex, dating, and even careers.²¹

MORE THAN A FEW GOOD MEN

It is important to emphasize that although an awful lot of American men may be down for the count, most men are still very much in the ring. Men still dominate the penthouses of American society and the commanding heights of power. Most work hard to support themselves and their families. They are ambitious and goal-oriented and are good husbands and fathers. The majority are still engaged in civic life, have embraced mature adulthood, and have more than a passing acquaintance with the notion of responsibility and other “good” values. They aren’t in trouble with the law. They don’t fritter away their time playing computer games or streaming endless movies.

Millions of them toil ten- and twelve-hour days at virtually every type of job. They work because they need to earn a living, sometimes working more than one job, sometimes because they are committed to their employer’s mission. They can be found picking up their kids at school and playing in adult softball leagues. When they go on a date, they are looking for a serious relationship, not a one-night stand. They keep themselves fit and well-groomed and are at ease when carrying on a conversation. They may have dreams of better tomorrows, but their dreams are ones that they put effort into achieving.

At home—meaning independent domiciles, not group houses, man caves, or parents’ spare bedrooms—more and more men help with child care, cooking, and housework. A growing minority has gone further, becoming egalitarian partners and very involved fathers.

Most men are neither damned losers nor neolithic misogynists. They have their faults and problems, but theirs are everyday ones that they manage. And they soldier on.

In fact, most Americans who are doing extremely well are men. Although women outnumber men as entrants into a great number of prestigious professions and one quarter of wives earn more than their husbands, more than 95 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are men; 88 percent of financial services executives are men; 82 percent of the directors, producers, and writers of the 250 top-grossing films in 2017 and 80 percent of the members of the 115th Congress are also men.²² Eighty-eight of the one hundred wealthiest Americans are men. And 71 percent of federal and state elected officials are male (and all but 6 percent of the 71 percent are white). At the same time, three-fourths of the workers in the nation’s ten lowest-paid occupations are women. And median weekly earnings for full-time male workers were \$944 at the end of 2017, which is \$173 more than those of women.²³

What makes thriving men different?

Some of the difference is a matter of social structure and class. Smart boys who grow up in upper-middle-class households exposed to greater intellectual stimulation are much more likely to make it into elite colleges and universities, get high-powered professional jobs, and become good husbands and fathers.²⁴ On the other hand, males from poorer families all too often face a brick wall, as “sticky” social mobility has made rags to rags a more common intergenerational story than rags to riches. Men with modest skills and education are more likely to face the slings and arrows of labor market misfortune. Yet there are many exceptions to this story line, and many bad boys grow up to be good men (and many good boys don’t sparkle later in life).

Beyond class and social structure, much of the success formula has to do with what values, skills, and attitudes, as well as knowledge, boys and young men learn from parents, school, media, and their communities. Boys who learn to obey rules and assume responsibilities and are neither too coddled nor neglected are likelier to carry these lessons into manhood. Boys who receive more reinforcement for doing well and aren’t allowed to get away with so much bad behavior and mediocre performance also have a better chance of being successful men. Although ambition and drive may not be rewarded

as much as we'd like, those who are ambitious and instilled with a strong work ethic early on do have a better chance at doing well in many realms of life. Likewise, boys and young men who get a bigger dose of good manners, leavened with a more flexible conception of gender roles, probably will do better with girlfriends, wives, partners, children, and employers.

Commitment to values and open-mindedness are key, whether they are achievement-driven, hipsters, entrepreneurs, diligent employees, rock-solid family men, patriots, or activists. Their beliefs matter, yet they are tolerant of the beliefs of others. They are generally strong and confident yet flexible and self-questioning. They are very much engaged with the present, but they don't simply "live for today"; they also have an eye on the future. Their perspectives, goals, time horizons, and social circles are broad, and their lives are about more than themselves.

That most men are doing well, that the subordinate status of women and the legacy of eons of sexism have faded to a good degree, and that the same is occurring in other countries do not make America's man out problem go away.

FORCED EXILE OR CHOSEN RETREAT?

Bill's story is one illustration of how so many American men are falling onto the sidelines. He has lived for about fifteen years in an upper-middle-class suburb of one of the East Coast's big cities. He is well-spoken and knowledgeable about current affairs. He is white and has two master's degrees. He had worked for several companies by his mid-40s, when he started taking too many days off and quit his job. Wanting to start a new career as a teacher, he got a third master's degree in education and was hired as a middle school chemistry teacher, only to be fired before his first school year was over.

At age 47, he stopped looking for work, and despite many offers of help from his wife and extended family, he rarely left home, became increasingly angry, and refused to take his children to appointments and school sporting events. His wife, also a professional with two master's degrees, worked full-time at modest pay, supporting him and their two children. Bill was repeatedly urged to look for a job, first by his wife, then by his children. Hearing such a basic, reasonable request, he would be resentful and stomp off. Instead he has spent a decade and a half of what some still call "the prime" of his life watching movies and reading.

Bill is now in his early 60s. Since his late 40s, he has been jobless by choice. After his wife filed for divorce, he moved into a rental room in a

nearby house. With no earnings, no wife to support him, his children and extended family alienated from him, and still no motivation to work, his present is barren and his future is bleak. Yet, generally, he sees nothing wrong with his decisions or where they have left him. His son, now out of college, sadly said, “I always wished that Daddy could have gotten a job and be someone I could look up to.”

At first, economic arguments seem most compelling. A brutal economy may appear to explain why great numbers of men, particularly those with little education and few skills, can no longer find jobs. Deindustrialization and automation, which have taken a particularly heavy toll in male occupations since the 1970s, eviscerated a once strong male working class. Despite a generally buoyant stock market, significant productivity growth, and officially low unemployment, Americans’ economic fortunes started to diverge in the late 1970s and 1980s, only to diverge more severely after strong economic growth in the late 1990s. Former president Obama called rising inequality “the defining issue of our time,” as the top one-fifth of earners—especially those in the storied “1 percent”—largely flourished while the bottom four-fifths saw their incomes after inflation stagnate or fall and the middle class “hollowed out.”

Is the divide between the men in command and the men on the sidelines yet another manifestation of growing inequality in America? Are we seeing a new version of *Upstairs, Downstairs*—with a shrinking majority of diligent workers, partners, fathers, and citizens and a growing minority who have more or less abdicated or been exiled from these essential adult roles?

However, only those who follow a strong reductionist approach would say that an economy failing the middle and working classes is the sole or major cause of men not participating in civic or political organizations, not committing to relationships or marriage, not working, not being good fathers, dying younger, and hiding out in basements, transfixed by video games and popping open another beer.

Economic factors certainly have seared the lives of many men and women in contemporary America. Ruthless corporations and financial institutions and laws rigged in favor of the wealthy and powerful have fleeced millions of hardworking American women and men. An economic democracy the United States is not.

Moreover, many sidelined men emphatically say they don’t want to be seen as failures and dropouts. They say they want to work, marry, own a house, and achieve the American Dream. They have tried hard, and they rightfully

bristle at the suggestion that they are irresponsible or lazy. They simply feel beaten down. With wages of \$12 per hour, part-time or contract jobs, and no pensions or retirement security, they are paupers compared to CEOs and others taking home millions per year. They also stand in stark contrast to the great mid-twentieth-century American middle class, which generally had ever rising wage and benefit packages during the quarter century after World War II.

Yet economic circumstances have been bad before and are worse today in other parts of the world. In times past—including much more economically challenging times—and in many countries that are not as rich as America, men have persevered and fought back. They have taken less than ideal jobs (which American women are more likely to do than men), spent long hours working, kept searching for work, and even demonstrated in the streets. Overall, they did not tune out. But despite a boiling anger across the land, a defining trait of so many sidelined men is their passivity and resignation.

Those who focus on growing gender disparities in educational achievement believe that some boys and young men have learned that it's "not cool for them to perform or be smart," as the principal of the Bronx Leadership Academy said.²⁵ On average, they don't perform as well as girls and young women from kindergarten to graduate school.

There are also ominous signs of declining health, particularly among less educated males: rising alcohol and opioid abuse and poisonings, suicide, increasing reports of physical and psychological pain, growing disability rolls, and even declining testosterone levels. Death rates for middle-age whites with a high school education or less have been on the rise since at least 1999. Suicide has increased dramatically among men. So too has impotence, particularly among younger men. Thanks to the magic of spam, reminders of "erectile dysfunction" fill many an inbox. Meanwhile, military leaders point to a sharp decline in the numbers of men who are physically or psychologically fit for service.²⁶

The distinctly worse and intertwined problems of racism, crime, and unemployment facing black men have become much more salient in the wake of police killings in Ferguson, Missouri, and elsewhere. The long shadow of four hundred years of U.S. slavery and racism has contributed to a dyad of oppression and dysfunction for too many young African American men. The deincarceration and Black Lives Matter movements are responses to the doors of opportunity being slammed shut on so many black men.

Feminism has done much for women, but it has had a more nuanced

effect on men. On the positive side, it has pushed men toward accepting women as equals and adopting more equal gender roles. Actors Alan Alda and Robin Williams in the late twentieth century helped make sensitivity and engaged fatherhood de rigueur in many quarters. The ranks of stay-at-home married dads has increased—to 209,000 in 2016—still a fraction of 1 percent of the nation’s approximately 36 million fathers of minor children.²⁷

However, feminism has confused, upset, and, in some people’s eyes, emasculated a number of men—not only Arnold Schwarzenegger’s “girly men” but those who realize that they can’t compete with women in the classroom, the conference room, or the bedroom. It has also created many unsettling ambiguities; many men who have internalized traditional masculine norms but rejected them in theory don’t really know what playbook to use. If men and women are equal, why do men pick up the tab, and why are fathers second-class parents at home and in the eyes of employers and courts?

The erosion of patriarchy is not to be bemoaned. Still, there is a palpable and bittersweet nostalgia for the debonair and successful Cary Grant, Gary Cooper, Don Draper, or the “working-class hero”—the masculine mystique of mid-twentieth-century America. Somewhere between the poles of James Bond and the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit were men who were bold yet dependable. There was no irony about being male.

Some female and male pundits and website warriors fight the gender wars. Some women use the seductive but vague notion of “masculinity” to demand that males “man up.” But for those who think that the adjective to modify masculinity is “toxic,” the message seems to be to “man down.” Across the gender divide, from the far reaches of the men’s rights/separatists’ “manosphere” to many more mainstream men, salvos against feminism often devolve into derision toward women. In men’s defense, survey data show that nearly as many women as men are drawn to “traditional” conceptions of masculinity.²⁸

Gender dynamics are a complicated dance of lingering prejudices and beliefs and changing expectations about men’s and women’s roles. Feminism, new laws, mixed messages from popular culture, the uncloseting of gay men, changing norms about sexuality, and women’s own ambivalence (or, if one takes a harsher view, double standard) all have contributed to muddling the minds of Joe Sixpack or even B. A. Bob about what it means to be a man. Barack Obama got nailed for his 2008 remark about unemployed Rust Belt workers “clinging to guns or religion,” but many men may have tried to shore up their masculinity with an overly zealous interest in guns, cars, and violent games and sports.

Politics might appear to be another culprit, or refuge, for men on the sidelines. George Wallace in 1968, Kevin Phillips's *Emerging Republican Majority* (1969), Archie Bunker, Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich and the Contract with America, the Tea Party, and Donald Trump seem to chart a half-century trajectory for the political potency of embattled white men. Although Trump could not have made it to the White House without the support of various other constituencies, pundits endlessly hailed the rise of the white American male *sansculottes*.

However, digging deeper, the capture of politics and policymaking by the rich has left some men and women to rightly question whether their voices matter. This is quite different from much of American history—at least for white men until the 1970s—when most white people at least felt represented by their government. This phenomenon comes on top of a decades-long assault on government whose unspoken subtext is that one would be a fool to try to effect positive changes through the core institutions of American democracy. This post-Nixon, Reagan-to-Trump-driven assault on the public sphere has particularly captivated working- and middle-class white men. But men's retreat from public life goes far beyond such politics and antigovernment polemics.

Political scientists such as Robert D. Putnam have highlighted the exodus from civic organizations as young and middle-age men are hardly beating down the doors of Rotary Clubs or churches.²⁹ Nor are men joining much else. As shout-outs to veterans at stadiums and on airplanes grow louder, few men choose to serve their country in the armed forces or AmeriCorps.³⁰

The sizable gender gap in voting and the Trump-era trope of angry white men are much discussed. The gendered nature of the erosion of public life, public service, and public trust in government, however, has largely gone unrecognized, as men are increasingly loners and rebels and women have become more likely to be active and “joiners.”

IS THIS A CHOICE?

Men out are neither purely victims of social and economic ills nor irredeemably irresponsible. Too many of these arguments for one or the other are made through blinkered “progressive” or “conservative” lenses.

Socioeconomic injustices are certainly worthy of attack, but to what degree are millions of men making a *choice*, or a series of choices, to give up on aspirations, institutions, and norms, and not engage with a changing

world—a world that is leaving many men behind? Of course, “choices” are made in contexts and in response to circumstances. Whether we believe in an all-powerful God, fate, or ineluctable “economic forces,” much of the time we are determinists; we tend to think that larger forces are at work, and we discount the role that choice plays in life.

No one happily chooses to be poor, laid off, lonely, powerless, or sick. However, one makes better or worse choices, and one does choose how to respond to difficult circumstances. One can choose to fight back or to strive individually or collectively to make life better. Or not.

But who is to say what’s a “better” choice? One could argue that hanging out in the basement or garage, primed to come up with the “next big thing,” may seem more rewarding than taking an unsatisfying job. Surveys seem to show that nonworking millennials are somewhat happier than their peers with jobs. Or one could argue that dating and not assuming the economic costs of a family offer more options and safety than “settling down” and becoming a long-term partner and father. Similarly, taking OxyContin or heroin or that fifth shot of vodka may feel better than living with physical and psychological pain. And in the libertarian spirit of “live free or die,” it may seem like a wise, principled choice in a broken polity to tend one’s own garden rather than commit to the furtherance of liberty and justice for all through a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

CULTURE AND HISTORY

Since the mid-twentieth century, when male employment rates were at their highest and slowly starting to decline, there have been two narratives about middle-age men who didn’t work: either they wanted to “escape the rat race” or they were having “midlife crises.”

In 1965 psychologist Elliott Jacques coined the term “midlife crisis” to describe mostly male, angst-ridden patients seeing their mortality over the horizon and their youthful dreams fade. Enter the red sports car and the young blonde. The idea caught fire as Hollywood played off the glamour and dangers of midlife crises in movies like *American Beauty*. Research has disproved the inevitability of “midlife crises,” but the notion lives on.³¹

At about the same time that Jacques came along, the idea of escaping the rat race of stressful, unfulfilling jobs became a popular, if unacted-upon, goal. This was seen as liberation from the stultifying life of being the “company man,” the “lifer,” who punched his time clock for forty years in exchange for

the proverbial gold watch. Echoing Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, in which the author said that "most men live lives of quiet desperation," John Updike's *Rabbit* novels vividly recast that idea for the late twentieth century in his antihero Harry Angstrom. Trapped in suburbia and marriage, the Angstrom character was aptly called by the *New York Times* "an older and less articulate Holden Caulfield." This was given added oomph by a 1960s counterculture that derided nine-to-five work.³²

This route to "freedom" undoubtedly was also a rationalization for abandoning once sacrosanct responsibilities of the Protestant work ethic. Despite the allure of getting off the treadmill and "firing your boss," as one book put it, few men actually did so, except for well-to-do aging hippies who gave up the corporate life to open a B&B, start a winery, or write a novel in a mountain cabin. One of many critics of this metaphor for mind-numbing conformity, the Reverend William Sloane Coffin, said, "Even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat."³³ Ideas about midlife crises and the rat race reflect that a lot of jobs can be bad for the soul, but nonwork can also scorch the soul.

In many ways the perfectly reasonable idea of greater freedom and choice got hijacked. Somewhere between Ivan Karamazov declaring that "if God does not exist, everything is permitted" and the 1960s ethos of "do your own thing" or "whatever turns you on," fewer and fewer behaviors became cultural requisites. Instead they became lifestyle choices. No one really said that it's okay to not work, or not work hard, or not be a good spouse or parent, or not be a good neighbor or citizen. But other values began to take precedence. Reinforced by an unholy alliance of advertising-driven consumerism, a pseudo-liberationist psychology, and a bastardized Buddhism, Americans (and others) more and more got the message that self-fulfillment and living for the moment were paramount life goals. The operative phrase from Jefferson's Declaration of Independence for a bookshelf's worth of post-1960s self-help books became "the pursuit of happiness."

Two influential books from the late 1970s—Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* and Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*—made parallel, but different, arguments that capitalism creates needs for self-gratification that undermine both the work ethic and civic engagement.³⁴ Narcissism and solipsism result, which weaken responsibility to others and belief in collective action, whether by government, civic clubs, unions, or neighborhood associations. Self-centeredness is a stingingly logical consequence of the post-1960s embrace of psychologist Abraham Maslow's idea that once an individual's needs for food and shelter are met, higher-level

needs, such as self-esteem and, ultimately, “self-actualization,” become most important. It’s also a very convenient philosophy for marketers to adopt in a rampantly consumerist society.

When Daniel Patrick Moynihan, building on the work of the pioneering French sociologist Émile Durkheim, spoke of “defining deviancy down,” he argued that a society can tolerate only so much “bad” behavior before it lowers its standards; what was once considered deviant increasingly enters the normative realm of tolerable behavior.³⁵

In a sense, that is what has happened. Cultural change and changes in attitudes are natural in any dynamic, open society, and the last fifty years of changes in beliefs and norms about gender roles and identity have ushered in a freer and less sexist and homophobic society. But the legions of American men who are on the fringes of American life reflect something else.

At about the same time that Moynihan wrote, during America’s cultural revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s, the leftist philosopher Robert Paul Wolff suggested that liberal “tolerance” may come at the expense of the common good. His contemporary Herbert Marcuse called such tolerance a “non-partisan tolerance” that “refrains from taking sides.” The consequence: almost anything is okay.³⁶

As more and more has become permissible, ever more adult males (and people in general) have been given license to behave in ways that were once out of bounds, not part of the standard operating procedure for American men. Seemingly dissimilar, but strangely consonant, voices provided sanction—from Timothy Leary, Hugh Hefner, and Ronald Reagan to welfare proponents, permissive parents, and ardent libertarians: Turn on and tune out. Love the one you’re with. Government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem. Protect the needy. Give children freedom. Live as you choose, so long as you don’t hurt others.

But as Kris Kristofferson and Janis Joplin said, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.”

So we return to Moynihan’s implicit question: Do we accept behaviors that are emblematic of these sidelined men?

Many women, children, parents, teachers, employers, economists, social scientists, and policymakers would say a resounding no. This large-scale exodus represents a huge economic loss, the difference in potential output between millions of men working and not working. A smaller workforce leads to a smaller economy. It also increases government costs, supporting these men on disability, Medicaid, and other means-tested programs.

Aside from the huge economic losses, there are arguably even greater emotional losses for wives watching their husbands become freeloaders, for unmarried women viewing many single men as hapless losers, for parents disappointed by seeing their adult sons (and some daughters) in pajamas half the day, and for children and dads not having each other in their lives. As we have seen, there are also losses for America's public life as men show less and less interest in constructive politics and organized groups.

But let's not forget the inner lives of these men on the sidelines. Most of them are hurting. Most don't want to be where they are. We need to put "choice" in quotation marks. Few men consciously "choose" to adopt "bad" behaviors, even if social sanctions against doing so have lessened.

We will come back to the economic circumstances that have done so much to sideline and even discard so many men and women, but that does not absolve us from recognizing that psychology—anger and resignation becoming volition—and culture are major parts of the story. Maybe phrases like "*coerced choice*" or "*negative nudges*" are more apt. While some conservatives rightly highlight perverse incentives for "bad" behavior, many others tar these men, like "welfare mothers" before them, as lazy leeches and bemoan—with considerable justification—a culture gone to hell.

If the culture is forcing or enabling so many men to "choose" to be on the sidelines as workers, fathers, citizens—a notion sure to elicit yowls from those on the left—then we must ask, What values and norms changed? How did these choices become acceptable, and who, if anyone, benefited from these changes? There have been clear winners and losers from these changes, and sidelined men are decidedly among the losers. However, those on the left, fearful of "blaming the victim" or being politically incorrect, generally have been as complicit as those on the right in denying the economics-culture nexus.

Mitt Romney may have lost the 2012 presidential election thanks in part to his horribly insensitive, incorrect, and politically inept comment that 47 percent of Americans could not be convinced to "take personal responsibility and care for their lives." Yet Romney touched on a theme that has swirled for years around our cultural landscape.

"Responsibility," a fraught term, particularly for liberals, is one oft-cited value that allegedly has gone to the winds. Hard to clearly define, it is not so hard to recognize in its absence. One can see a decline of responsibility in all too many corners of America—from the hyper-rich hiding their trillions in the Cayman Islands and companies offshoring profits in tax havens to the

supposedly liberal counterculture that put “self-actualization” first and said to hell with work, marriage, commitment, parenthood, and society.

Other values often said to have gone missing include self-reliance, drive, the work ethic, ambition, self-respect, courtesy, patriotism, civic engagement, altruism, and toughness. All of these were nearly universally seen as positive and have been variously referred to as “traditional,” “American,” and “masculine.”

For all the talk of a degradation of values, rarely have the distinctly male elements of this issue been considered. To the extent that cultural values have deteriorated—or, to be more neutral, changed—there has been little attention to how and why they have changed differently for men, or some men, than for women.

As suggested, many factors have been fingered for the decline in values—an economy of exclusion, the imperative to maximize earnings, demagogic attacks on government, the withering of organized religion, and the hippie-inspired “let it all hang out” philosophy gone mainstream. As one army brigade commander told me, “I have a three in ten problem. Three in ten [recruits] have the moral, mental, and physical qualities” to succeed.³⁷

The “traditional” role of the man as provider may have been sexist, keeping women in what Betty Friedan more than fifty years ago called the “comfortable concentration camp” of housewifery, but it did bespeak responsibility. Men worked; fought, through unions, for decent wages and benefits; went about supporting their families; and stood tall in their communities and country. A man who wasn’t working and married and at least a half-decent father was either a “bum” or a “beatnik,” straying onto the “path less traveled” or so devastated by mental illness or trauma to be generally pilloried or pitied. In the world of *Father Knows Best* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, these men didn’t exist. If they did, they were often portrayed as comedic figures, defying social norms.

The “anything goes” culture spawned by the revolution in norms and mores of the 1960s and 1970s also has given some men a cultural pass to live what was once quaintly called “alternative lifestyles.” The sexual revolution, too, has given men another pass to hook up or become serial daters and not step up to the plate as husbands, fathers, or reliable partners. And technology—the internet, social media, smart phones, gaming, even earbuds—has done more than oceans of LSD to make it easy to tune out from a world of in-the-flesh human interaction.

Today some men have supports that they didn’t have in the past—working

wives, longer-living parents, and a modest government safety net. However, factors such as these only go so far to explain why such values have withered away for too many American men. In general, it's not because they are "lazy" or "cheats" but because a changed culture has made it at least somewhat okay to retreat from productive, caring, and civic-spirited lives. This brings us to an even more charged set of "explanations": just as an overly simple economic history might blame the increasing power of capital relative to labor, financialization, automation, or globalization, a simplistic cultural history could lay the blame for these negative cultural changes on hippies, Hollywood, and pop psychology.

Answers to why up to one quarter of America's men are sidelined are badly needed. This first requires understanding the problem in its many dimensions.

Returning to Bob Dylan: "There must be some kinda way out of here." But until problems are seen for what they are, and the reality of American men on the sidelines is seen as a composite problem, how can we even begin to look for remedies? In the following pages, we will explore both the economic and cultural dimensions of this problem, recognizing that solutions will require changes in both.

Once again, it is worth turning to Moynihan, who pithily provided powerful frameworks for analysis and bringing about change: "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that defines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself."³⁸