

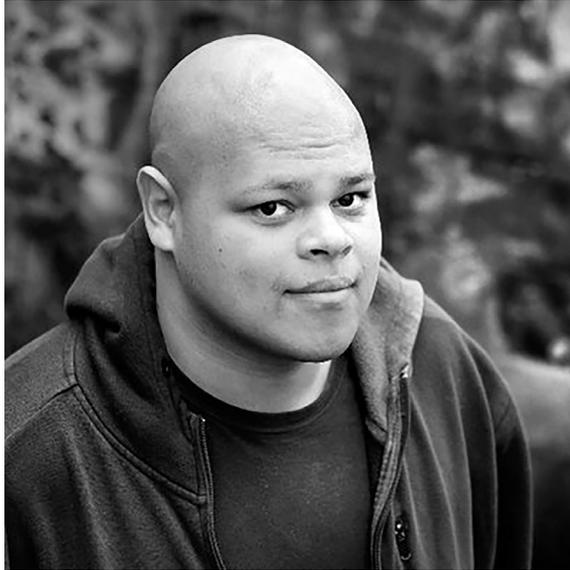
WHY YOUNG MEN

The Dangerous Allure of
Violent Movements and
What We Can Do About It

JAMIL JIVANI



SPARKING
IMAGINATION,
CONVERSATION
& CHANGE



JAMIL JIVANI

Jamil Jivani is a Canadian lawyer, activist and professor, born and raised in Toronto. Jivani's work in disadvantaged communities has taken him around the world to learn about the challenges and opportunities facing young people. Jivani holds research and teaching appointments at Yale University and Osgoode Hall Law School, where he has focused on the needs of youth, immigrants and low-income families. He is also the director of law and policy at Our Ohio Renewal, a nonprofit organization founded to develop solutions for the issues raised in J.D. Vance's bestselling book *Hillbilly Elegy*. Prior to obtaining his law degree at Yale, Jivani graduated from York University and Humber College.

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FOREWORD



During my first days at Yale Law School, I distinctly remember meeting two people. The first was the girl who would eventually become my wife. The second was Jamil Jivani, the author of the book you now hold in your hands.

Jamil and I didn't obviously share much in common. He was a black guy from Canada; I was a white guy from America. He grew up in a big city, and I grew up in a small town. He didn't understand why I liked guns, and I didn't understand why "about" sounded like "aboot" when he pronounced it.

But appearances can be deceiving, and Jamil and I quickly realized our similarities. We were both patriotic, and loved and admired our home countries, despite their imperfections. We both owed much of our lives' opportunities to women—my grandmother, his mother—who stepped up when others let us down. We both felt a strong connection to our communities back home

even as we lacked a certain comfort with the elite environment of Yale. Neither of us came from families with money. And we both knew very personally the feeling of loss and shame that comes from growing up without your father around.

Early during that first year of law school, Jamil and I found ourselves in a large group eating at a late-night chicken joint. As everyone filed out, Jamil and I both noticed the terrible mess we'd left and stayed behind to clean everything up. "We are probably the only people here who've ever had to clean up someone else's mess," I said. Jamil just nodded in agreement.

Jamil would eventually become one of my best friends. Years later, at my wedding, I chose Jamil to read my favorite verse from the Bible, from Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

I am proud of Jamil. Proud mostly of the man he has become and strives to become each day. Proud of his dedication to his beliefs. Proud of this book he has written, published for the first time in my home country. In it, Jamil asks the question, as the title indicates, "Why young men?" Why do young men seem to be struggling so much in our modern society? Why are young male immigrants less able to assimilate into their new homes in the West? Why are so many young men in the inner city caught up in gang activity? Why is it that so much of the violence, social dysfunction and misery in our societies disproportionately exists and flows from our young men?

His answer is that today's world throws more traps and

temptations in front of young men than ever before with even fewer ladders out of the ditches they end up in. From their families, their neighborhoods, their communities and even their countries, young men find themselves a little more disconnected and isolated than ever before. Moreover, there are fewer sources of legitimate and productive meaning available. Thus, there's a temptation to take the easy or fun way out of situations. Tragically, of course, the easiest way out of a given crisis is often the most destructive.

Jamil's way of answering that question is insightful and engaging. It's impossible to do justice to a book—or indeed, a man's life—in a brief foreword. But Jamil brings perhaps the three most important qualities to this task: a brilliant intellect, a life of experiences and insights and real moral courage. Jamil does not avoid tough questions, or make the most ideologically or politically convenient arguments. He takes the world as it is. He allows experience and data to inform and guide him. And he tackles this extraordinarily difficult topic with grace and compassion. I am biased, of course, but I believe that this is an important book.

One of the things I admire most about my friend is that he has not lost his passion for working on the things he cares about. A few years after we graduated from law school, as I thought about creating a nonprofit organization focused on the opioid epidemic that is ravaging my home state of Ohio, I called Jamil. He had created nonprofits of his own before, and I wanted his advice on how to proceed. He offered to take a sabbatical from his teaching position in Toronto and help me get the organization off the ground.

The organization we created together was low budget and leanly budgeted. We focused initially on a couple of public policy issues, especially on increasing access to kinship guardians. In

Ohio, there are so many parents incapacitated (or worse) because of their addiction, that there's an entire generation of children growing up without stable homes. And, terribly, the grandparents, aunts, uncles and other relatives who want to take care of those children can't because of various legal and financial barriers. Our organization pushed some legislation to remedy that problem. (It's still a work in progress, but we have at least acquired a number of cosponsors.)

We've also successfully brought a nationally renowned addiction expert to southeastern Ohio, where the epidemic is the worst, and funded some of her work in treating patients and researching the epidemic. At every step of the way, Jamil has thought through how to solve problems, attract resources and implement our plans. This is not a person who merely writes or thinks about our society's most troubling problems. He actually does something about them.

About a year ago, I began noticing that Jamil was often feeling ill. It was fall, and he was in a new environment, so I just assumed he was having a run of bad luck with cold and flu season. But one day he called me and told me that he had returned home to Toronto for treatment, and that his doctors thought he likely had advanced lymphoma.

There is simply nothing that can prepare you for the news that your friend—a young and healthy friend, at that—has been diagnosed with cancer. Jamil and I spoke about his treatment plan, and his progress, as weeks with cancer turned into months. I knew he was optimistic that he could beat the disease, and I knew that he drew a lot of strength from his community in Toronto, especially his church. Throughout his treatment, Jamil never gave in

to pessimism or defeatism. There were certainly hard days, and both the disease and the treatments took a physical toll, but Jamil persevered. And he always checked in on our organization, doing what he had to even at the lowest points of the disease.

As I write this, Jamil has finished his cancer treatment and is hopeful that in the weeks to come he'll receive a clean bill of health. His health has given the book a new poignancy, and it's tough for me to separate this book from the disease that came into his life just as the book approached publication. But the book, like Jamil, is bigger than any health problem.

After I proposed to my wife, my favorite professor, Amy Chua, threw us an engagement party. She asked Jamil and a few others to give toasts. Jamil and I were very close, so his toast naturally focused on me. "We are," he told me (and about a hundred others), "a generation of fatherless men. For so much of our lives, we've had to figure out how to be men on our own."

In Canada and the United States, this is undoubtedly true. There are so many fatherless men out there, and we owe it to them to figure out why they struggle so much. Jamil's book, and the life he's led, helps us begin to do that.

J. D. Vance

INTRODUCTION

Paris Attacks



On November 13, 2015, a series of suicide bombings and mass shootings killed or injured nearly 500 people in and around Paris, France. These violent acts were carried out by nine men who belonged to the terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The president of France called the Paris attacks an “act of war” against his country.

Over the following days, news media pundits and social media influencers quickly gathered in their ideological camps to treat the attackers as faceless representatives of a religion or a race to be criticized or defended. One side blamed religion and culture for the killings, while the other expressed concern over racism in response to terrorism. These debates predictably looked the same as the famous exchange between actor Ben Affleck and philosopher Sam Harris on HBO’s *Real Time with Bill Maher* following another terrorist attack the previous year. Harris, representing the “blame

religion and culture” side, argued that among the billion-plus Muslims in the world, there are significant numbers who hold extreme beliefs, and among that group there are jihadists who want to wage war against nonbelievers. In response, Affleck, representing the “fear racism” side, was passionately defensive and compared Harris to people who stereotype and stigmatize black Americans because of gang violence.

Missing in these discussions was an effort to see the men beyond the monsters, to see the individual stories buried beneath headlines and left out of viral videos. The actual lives of the Paris attackers and, just as important, the communities around them were mostly ignored or only superficially examined. But as the debates went on, I learned that the young men who orchestrated these tragedies weren’t as foreign to me as I’d initially thought, or as Affleck-and-Harris-style exchanges would indicate.

The masterminds of the Paris attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Salah Abdeslam, didn’t lead ordinary lives before pledging allegiance to ISIS, but their lives also weren’t necessarily indicative of the killers they would become. Both were born in Belgium in the late 1980s to parents who had emigrated from Morocco, and they were raised together in the Molenbeek district of Brussels. Both men had also been involved with petty crime: they were arrested together for attempting to break into a parking garage in 2010, and Abaaoud had been to prison at least three times. Abdeslam, on the other hand, had tried his luck at becoming an entrepreneur: he was the manager and part owner of a bar in Molenbeek. Neither man’s background suggested that he was particularly devout or traditional in his adherence to Islam. The reli-

gion and culture of both men's parents seemed to be a distant part of their lives.

To my surprise, there were similarities between the Paris attackers and some of the young men I had grown up with in the Toronto suburbs: children of immigrants, living in a disadvantaged neighborhood, drawn into petty crime, and ambitious to a fault. Of course, none of my peers ever transitioned from petty crime to the extremes of terrorism. That doesn't mean they weren't equally vulnerable to destructive influences, however. Growing up, they were often easily persuaded by the people around them to do harmful things. Most of what they got into trouble for, such as fighting, was the result of being around people who encouraged them to be criminals.

I wondered if ISIS's success at recruiting young men in Europe was a more extreme example of what I had seen in my own life and that of my friends. And if so, why had my friend appeared on a local Crime Stoppers report for petty crimes rather than on CNN or the BBC for terrorism? Can we learn something valuable about how these young men in Europe become so disconnected from their countries that they can be recruited by a foreign enemy? Hoping to find answers to these questions, I traveled to Brussels in February 2016 to conduct the research that appears in this book.

The time I spent in Belgium after the Paris attacks marked an expansion of my activism outside of the urban centers of the United States and Canada, where I have spent more than a decade focused on young men exposed to violent criminals, ideologies that encourage conflict and other antisocial influences. Specifically, I have worked to help young men find positive influences by

improving the public institutions that shape their lives, such as schools, child welfare agencies and police departments, and by empowering men to be more involved in their communities as parents, mentors and youth workers. My activism is rooted in my own journey from a supposedly illiterate high school student who considered a life of crime to Yale Law School graduate and award-winning lawyer.

On the surface, the various types of violent groups that draw young men—gangs, terror cells, extremist networks, more loosely organized criminals—are widely seen as being completely different from one another. One thing is certain: such groups thrive when enough people believe that differences of race, religion, class or neighborhood are irreconcilable. And, in my work, I've discovered remarkable similarities between young men who turn to violence in search of belonging and brotherhood. Many of these traits are also exhibited by self-destructive young men—those coping with addiction or contemplating suicide—and isolated young men, whose behavior isn't so extreme that they make the news cycle, but who have nevertheless withdrawn from the outside world. The techniques and strategies that have been shown to help one group of marginalized young men can be applied to the others.

The impetus for this book was an interview Canadian journalist Nahlah Ayed did with me when I first left Toronto for Belgium. I was nervous because Nahlah is a world-renowned journalist and I was still relatively new to being on TV. I answered most of the questions reasonably well—until I was caught off guard by her final one: Why young men?

Nahlah wanted to understand why journalists like her end up talking about young men like me so often. It is true that we appear

in news headlines an awful lot, and most of the time it's not for good reasons. That day, though, I buckled under the weight of the question, overwhelmed by the number of directions it could go in. I settled on focusing on the economic pressures faced by young men, explaining that when they don't believe they'll be able to support themselves or their families, they may experience trauma that leads to extreme thinking and behaviors.

The answer wasn't very good—it was too short and too simple—and I stumbled through it. Leaving the TV studio, I felt like a failure. As a young man myself, I know the struggles and triumphs of young men. I conducted research on the topic for years as a student. My work now is designed to help alleviate these struggles and reproduce these triumphs. My answer should have reflected these personal and professional insights.

But the interview was over, so I carried the question with me. And I've written this book so I can give the world a better answer.

The following pages include what I've learned in trying to understand why young men in the West are vulnerable to falling outside the reach of mainstream morals in the countries they call home. I also want to raise some ideas that could better protect young men from the negative influences seeking them out. Above all, I want to develop the language and reference points to help families communicate about what's going on in the lives of young men.

In the stories I tell, young men come across as good guys and bad guys, victims and perpetrators, heroes and villains. I have changed some personal details and also made use of composite characters.

Most of my writing is set in majority black and Muslim communities because that's where I've lived and worked, but my hope

is to transcend racial and religious differences to highlight common experiences that shape the lives of young men. I seek to highlight voices that are often underrepresented and overlooked, and which increasingly require our collective attention. I don't intend to displace or take away from efforts to discuss the experiences of young women and others whose voices must also be heard. In this respect, I am following the example set by President Barack Obama's My Brother's Keeper initiative, which focuses on the lives of young men without undermining other efforts to achieve justice and equality.

This book also outlines methods of community organizing and activism that have successfully combated various types of youth radicalization around the world. If community organizers and activists better learned from one another, shared resources and exchanged best practices, we would be better positioned to protect young men from the harmful influences seeking them out. Parents, teachers, and others seeking to mentor young men can also benefit from understanding these methods of engaging youth in crisis.

Finally, a handful of important books helped facilitate my personal growth as a young man. At different points in my life, the right book at the right time challenged my worldview and changed how I thought about myself and others. I hope *Why Young Men* might do the same for other people who find themselves in a similar position.

1

Role Models

In my family, it's tradition to grow up without male role models. My father, Ismat, didn't have a father figure for much of his childhood, and he left me in the same position. Both of us are part of the intergenerational cycle of fatherlessness that makes young men vulnerable to people posing as authorities on masculinity.

Ismat was born in 1963 at the Aga Khan University Hospital in Nairobi, Kenya. I don't know why, but his biological parents didn't take him home after he was born, so he was cared for by the hospital until the age of one, when he was adopted by people who seem to have loved him dearly. From what I've been told, however, both of his adoptive parents had tragically passed away in separate incidents by the time he turned fourteen. He was then largely on his own, with minimal to no support from his adoptive relatives. In some of his most formative years, he was without parental figures altogether.

What Ismat had going for him was his hustle and intelligence. As a teenager, he used his inheritance from his adoptive parents to put himself through cooking school. He worked as an apprentice at the Hilton Hotel in Nairobi, then pushed for a transfer to the Hilton in London. He became a chef and embarked on a successful career working in hotels.

His life up to that point is an inspiring story of what hard work can do for you. I feel proud when I tell people about my father's difficult start in life and how high he climbed before he was even twenty. But that pride fades quickly when I begin talking about what his life became as he grew into adulthood. The lack of male role models in his life caught up to him after he met my mother.

Ismat met Pam when he was twenty-two years old. He had traveled to Toronto to attend the wedding of one of his adoptive cousins, who happened to be a co-worker of my mother's. After their chance meeting at the wedding, my parents quickly got married themselves, and my father relocated to Toronto from London. They had three children, with me the first. The pressures of being a husband and father weighed on Ismat early on, meaning their relationship never really got off to a good start. By the time their second child was born, Ismat was already slipping in his responsibilities. He was at home sleeping while Mom gave birth to my sister Jasmine.

Ismat was a far more successful chef than he was a husband or father. In Toronto, he worked in expensive restaurants and built a strong reputation for himself. He even appeared on television a few times to promote the restaurants where he cooked. Meanwhile, Ismat the husband and father was largely absent. Many days he wasn't around at all. I would go to sleep most nights not having seen

or spoken to him. Mom would say it was because he was working late. Eventually I was old enough to see he was choosing not to be home because he had other places he wanted to be.

An important difference between Ismat the chef and Ismat the husband or father is that he had role models to help him learn how to cook. He went to school for it. He worked as an apprentice for years under the tutelage of chefs who showed him how to wash dishes, chop vegetables, work a fryer, use a stove, boil pasta, grill a steak and bake a cake. He just didn't have the same education in being a husband or father.

As his oldest child, I've struggled to have empathy for Ismat. Certainly, I was hurt by his absence—and even more hurt by his terrible behavior when he was around. He was always yelling and bullying, as if he wanted us to be glad when he was gone. I've continued to hold a grudge against him as an adult because I've seen the consequences of his choices for my mother and sisters. I've also learned to look back at how he was as a husband and father, however, and remind myself that he, too, was a fatherless young man.

My family has one home video of us, on an old VHS tape from 1989. The video was a gift from one of Ismat's friends in honor of the birth of my sister Jasmine. In the film are scenes from the hospital where she was born and the days after she came home. When I watched it as a kid, I loved it because we seemed like the families I saw on television. There are images of my parents together, my father sitting on the couch, me playing with a toy guitar and baby Jasmine doing what babies do.

I haven't watched the video in many years, but in my last few viewings I started to see something I'd missed as a kid. I could see Ismat's struggles: the distant look in his eyes when he was around

his wife and kids, his discomfort when showing affection, the emotionless expressions on his face. Our few family photos tell a similar story of a man who just didn't know what he was doing. In a picture of the two of us sitting together on the couch, he looks like he doesn't want to be there with every fiber of his being. A picture of him with his arm around my mom captures his forced and uncomfortable body language. He looks like he is posing for a picture he wishes wasn't being taken.

Ismat's ignorance of his role in our family also played out in the few interactions we had as father and son, such as on Father's Day, which was one of my least favorite days of the year. In third grade, I came home from school with a picture I'd drawn of Ismat as a superhero, kind of like Balrog, the boxer character from the video game *Street Fighter*. I spent hours at school that day working on it. I tried to make my father look cool, and I knew he really liked boxing. The top of the drawing read "Happy Father's Day." I was glad he was home because I didn't often get to see him. I handed him the drawing with high hopes for how he might react. When he looked at it, he seemed confused. "What does this mean?" he said dismissively. He then put it to the side, never even making eye contact with me. Not once.

There was something phony about the whole thing. My father didn't deserve a day in his honor—nor did he deserve a gift from any of his kids. That damned teacher had set me up, I thought. She'd made me look like an idiot by forcing me to give him some gift he could toss to the side like it was worthless. And there I was, trying to reach out to him as a son, only to feel rejected once again.

Mom could see the frustration in my eyes. To cheer me up, she

picked up the drawing and told me it was good. She put it on the fridge as if it was something valuable. Whenever I got upset with my father, Mom would try to fix things by showing me enough positive attention to compensate for his negative behavior. Sometimes she was successful at turning those negative moments into positive ones; other times she wasn't.

If I could go back in time, I would love to ask her, "Is this what a man is supposed to be like? If yes, why? If not, then what should I grow up to be like?" Instead of having that discussion, though, we both just left things unsaid. We moved on as if nothing happened, but these moments stuck with both of us.

There was a period of time—when I was seven or eight years old and he was thirty—that I remember Ismat coming home from work very late at night. At least twice he woke me up to talk to me. I was really happy to see him. On the first of those nights, he told me about a new handshake he was doing at work—one reminiscent of a handshake Will Smith did on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. I still remember it to this day, but I've never used it.

The situation was much more serious on the second night, when he came into my room, sat on the edge of my bed and cried. He told me he didn't know how much longer he could keep doing "this." I was scared because I didn't know what "this" meant. Was he talking about being my dad? Or working? Or coming home late? He told me that he was working so hard for his family, and that he was always tired and hurting. After a few minutes of silence, he stopped crying, said good night and left my room.

Having lacked role models to draw on as a kid, Ismat obviously didn't have those resources as a young man, either. He was struggling not just with being a father and husband but also with being

a whole person. He was living a life of such emotional suppression that one of the few people he felt he could open up to was his son, who wouldn't judge or criticize him. Ismat didn't have a supportive community he could rely on to help him on his journey as a husband and father. He was struggling to figure everything out on his own.

My parents' marriage gradually fell apart. I recall both of them making comments to me about separation as early as the mid-1990s, just a few years after the birth of their third child, my sister Janine. But the state of their relationship was never quite clear to me. Ismat became increasingly absent and was away for longer periods of time, until eventually I didn't expect to see him at all. Every so often it seemed like Mom was trying to make the marriage work again—encouraging my father to be home more by getting us to do things as a family, like go out to eat—but when I was in my late teens she gave up and made it clear to me that their relationship was over.

I often thought about how Ismat's absence affected me. I listened to songs about growing up without a father to look up to. Two Jay-Z songs in particular, "Meet the Parents" and "Where Have You Been," were my favorites. I wondered if I, too, would be a disappointment to my children when I grew up. Perhaps it was fate, or something in my DNA.

Mom had a lot to think about in my father's absence as well. She wasn't prepared for the kind of dysfunction that existed in her own marriage and the family she had created with Ismat. She had been raised in a two-parent household—her Scottish father was a school janitor, and her Irish mother kept the house and kids in order. She has three siblings, including a twin sister, and the four of

them went to church regularly as kids. They had, from what I can tell, a fairly stable and boring (in a good way) childhood.

Perhaps it was hard for Mom to talk to me about my father because doing so reminded her of how far the situation she found herself in was from the stability she'd grown up with. She also had to deal with the heartache my father brought into her life, which affected her greatly, in ways I'll never begin to know. What I do know is that I could see the pain in her eyes when my sisters and I asked where our father was. Mom gradually became less social and seemed to embrace loneliness. She spent so much time excusing my father's poor behavior when they were together that she probably thought that's how men are supposed to be. She gave up on the possibility of meeting someone who might be different. Both she and I struggled in silence, never talking about how my father's behavior affected us.

Just as Ismat was put on this path by the absence of his biological and adoptive fathers, I was on a similar path marked by similar challenges because of *his* absence. I didn't have him there to steer me away from the negative influences I encountered growing up. This is the cyclical nature of broken families. I've inherited his struggle in my own efforts to learn about masculinity and manhood without role models at home. I also carry a deep anxiety about what this means for my future ability to be a husband and father. I imagine my father didn't set out to be a bad parent. I bet he told himself he was going to be there for his kids in all the ways he wished his father had been for him. He probably also told himself he was going to be a good man and love his wife the way she deserved. That's also what I tell myself, and I'm concerned that those good intentions won't matter.

I can look back on my life and see where Ismat's intervention or positive example might have kept me from making bad choices. For instance, as a high school student I often got into fights, mostly because I held on to a conflict-oriented view of masculinity. To be a man was to fight, I thought. In grade eleven, I was suspended following an incident in our school cafeteria. Some older students who had been trying to assert themselves as the tough guys in our school had challenged me to a fight earlier that week. I saw one of them in the cafeteria right before lunch on a day I was ready to fight and asked if he still wanted to go at it. As we were swearing at each other a crowd gathered, which tipped off a vice principal that something bad was about to happen. The crowd scattered when the vice principal showed up, leaving no one in the cafeteria except for me and a few of the guys who wanted to fight me. The vice principal tried to single me out as the problem. I didn't want to talk to him, so he suspended me.

Mom was called to the school to meet with that same vice principal. Afterward, she tried her best to speak to me about what had happened, but she could only see the issue from the school's perspective. To her, I was wrong because I was getting into fights and disregarding an authority figure. I wasn't able to get her to see my side of the story: I needed to be tough and look tough. I couldn't refuse to fight. Nor could I just be obedient to the vice principal. To me, getting suspended wasn't as bad as going to school and having people think I was weak or a snitch.

Ismat probably would have understood what I was thinking and feeling—I'd heard stories about him getting into fights when he was young, too. He wasn't around, though, so Mom was stuck trying

to figure it all out on her own. It would have helped to have a role model who could show me that being a man didn't mean being like the rappers I saw on television. Without that, moments like the one in the cafeteria pushed me further toward the Hollywood gangster subculture I was already obsessed with—and later toward other groups that offered an alternative vision for who and what men could be.

Recognizing the importance of fathers doesn't dismiss the importance of mothers in the lives of young men. It's about acknowledging that male role models are important, and that their absence has consequences. The National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), a non-profit organization working to end fatherlessness in the United States, claims "there is a father factor in nearly all social ills facing America today."¹ This bold statement is backed up by research showing that fatherless children are more likely to have behavioral problems, live in poverty, experience abuse or neglect, use drugs or alcohol, repeat grades in school, become teenage parents and go to prison. NFI research also shows that adolescent boys with absentee fathers are especially likely to engage in criminal and other delinquent behaviors.

A 2013 literature review by researchers from Princeton University, Cornell University, and the University of California, Berkeley, also found that fatherlessness significantly impacts children. These researchers examined forty-seven studies from both Western and non-Western countries and concluded, "We find strong evidence that father absence negatively affects children's social-emotional development, particularly by increasing externalizing behavior [such as aggression and attention seeking]. These

effects may be more pronounced if father absence occurs during early childhood than during middle childhood, and they may be more pronounced for boys than for girls.”²

University of Virginia professor W. Bradford Wilcox, the co-editor of *Gender and Parenthood: Biological and Social Scientific Perspectives*, has outlined four distinct ways that involved fathers can contribute to children’s lives: (1) playing with children in ways that show how to properly use your body for play and not violence, (2) encouraging children to take risks and be independent, (3) offering physical protection or the appearance of physical protection and (4) providing firm discipline.³ Wilcox has argued that in the absence of these contributions, sons “are more vulnerable to getting swept up in the Sturm und Drang of adolescence and young adulthood, and in the worst possible way.”⁴

The challenges posed by fatherlessness are growing across the West. Divorce rates and single-parent households have been on the rise for decades in Europe and North America. The United States is the clearest example of this change, with up to 50 percent of first marriages ending in divorce and subsequent marriages failing at an even higher rate.⁵ Of all American children born in 2014, 40 percent were born out of wedlock.⁶ And one-third of American children live without the involvement of their biological fathers.⁷ Statistics Canada reports that 12.8 percent of Canadian children live in fatherless households.⁸ In the United Kingdom, more than one-fifth of families with dependent children are without fathers in the home.⁹ Across the European Union 16 percent of children are growing up in single-parent households headed by the mother.¹⁰

Jay-Z has talked about the vulnerability to outside influences that comes from growing up without a father: “We were kids with-

out fathers, so we found our fathers on wax and on the streets and in history.” He goes on to describe this search as “a gift,” because he and his peers “got to pick and choose the ancestors who would inspire the world we were going to make for ourselves.”¹¹ Searching for father figures is, to paraphrase one of Jay-Z’s album subtitles, both a gift and a curse—a gift if the inspirations you choose motivate you to make positive contributions to the world, a curse if your inspirations motivate you to make negative contributions.

Jay-Z himself is an example of that gift and curse. I know young men who looked up to the Jay-Z who rapped about selling drugs and making money at all costs. I know others who looked up to the Jay-Z who became one of America’s great entrepreneurs and gave back to his community as a philanthropist. Some versions of Jay-Z negatively influenced the people I grew up with by fueling their gangster fantasies and glorifying a life of crime and violence. Other versions positively influenced some of those same people by showing them how to dress professionally or inspiring them to become businessmen.

Behind all the statistics about fatherless homes are increasing numbers of young men experiencing the gift and curse of choosing who shows them how to be men. That means we have more unpredictability about and less control over the direction our boys will take as they grow into men, and we face a greater likelihood that they’ll stray from the reach of mainstream morals. For young men in these circumstances, the wider community becomes increasingly important as a source of positive role models who can set an example for how to be men and also intervene when young men adopt destructive forms of masculinity.

Traditionally, two of the most important institutions providing

male role models outside of the home were schools and places of worship. These institutions formally and informally connected young men to older men who could provide examples of how to live a healthy life. Today, however, these institutions are drastically losing their influence over young men and failing to keep them engaged.

The decline of religious influence in Europe and North America has been growing for decades. The BBC reports significant downward shifts in religious observance for Christians in these regions, with some researchers identifying particularly stark drops among young adults. For instance, the number of Anglicans in Britain fell from 40 percent of the population in 1983 to 17 percent in 2014.¹² The Pew Research Center reported that there were 5.6 million fewer Christians in Europe from 2010 to 2015.¹³ And the population share of Christians in the United States declined by 8.2 percent from 2007 to 2014.¹⁴ Some of my European friends have told me that the only time they go to church is for weddings and funerals. That's mostly the same for the Christians I know in North America, too.

There are typically higher observance rates among immigrant communities because religion plays a larger role in public life in many other parts of the world. Still, the trend of young adults moving away from places of worship extends to minority communities in the West when the right religious institutions are not in place.

For example, mosques in Europe often struggle to reach Muslims there because of language barriers.¹⁵ In many mosques, religious leaders don't speak the local language and instead offer their services in Arabic, a language that young men born in Europe may not speak with fluency. Religious leaders are often educated out-

side of Europe, and they make use of Islamic literature created outside of the West, in places like Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This reliance on non-Western countries is partly a result of insufficient local investment in religious education in Europe. Two Muslim parents in Belgium, Ilias Marraha and Ibtisam Van Driessche, have responded to this problem by creating children's books in Belgian languages. These books are designed to introduce young people to Islam from the perspective of European Muslim authors.

Similar efforts to invest in and grow local religious education may be a critical step in countering extremism. Richard Alexander Nielsen, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, analyzed texts from a hundred Sunni Muslim clerics and found that the presence of strong local education networks and promising job opportunities in their communities may discourage clerics from preaching radical ideas.¹⁶ Nielsen also found that clerics in Saudi Arabia and Egypt who are desperate for followers sometimes self-radicalize to distinguish their message from that of more established authorities.

The communities built through faith networks are today less central to the lives of many people, and young people in particular, than has been the case in the past. As those sources for possible role models disappear, they leave voids that can be filled by other influences, sometimes positive and sometimes negative. British rabbi Jonathan Sacks has argued that these voids embolden radicals, who often are “the sharpest, clearest voices” reaching out to young people from a religious perspective.¹⁷

The disappearance of role models from homes and religious institutions is often difficult for societies to address because of how personal questions of family and faith are. In the West, however,

we do hope to standardize public education to some extent, as a way of providing a minimal level of support to all young people. Schools are publicly funded places where we send our children to be educated, nurtured and encouraged. We expect teachers, guidance counselors, peers and others in our schools to set positive examples for our young men. Sad to say, schools throughout the Western world are also failing to connect with young men, diminishing their ability to serve as a source of role models.

While males make up slightly more than half of high school students in the United States, they account for only 43 percent of postsecondary students.¹⁸ According to an analysis of US Department of Education statistics by researchers at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, boys receive 71 percent of school suspensions and make up 67 percent of special education students; they are also five times more likely to be labeled hyperactive and 30 percent more likely to flunk or drop out of school.¹⁹ In England, male students are 36 percent less likely to attend university than female students; the numbers are even worse in other parts of the United Kingdom.²⁰

These signs of male disengagement reflect a broader trend across Europe and North America. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental economic body, has described the current state of education in its member nations, which include most of the countries in Western Europe and North America, as “the reversal of the gender gap.” Male students make up just 45 percent of secondary school graduates and 42 percent of bachelor’s degree recipients in OECD countries.²¹

What the OECD describes as a reverse gender gap looks dif-

ferent from one community to the next. In the United States, for example, black men lag significantly behind black women in educational attainment, creating a gender gap more pronounced than that in white communities.²² This reverse gender gap among black Americans has been in place for decades, long before it began showing up in broader OECD trends. In Europe's Muslim communities, however, the reverse gender gap is a more recent phenomenon. In older generations, men performed better in school than women, but in younger generations, the reverse is true—Muslim communities in Europe are now mirroring the gender gaps found in wider society.²³

Researchers affiliated with the Equality of Opportunity Project, a collaborative effort by professors at Stanford, Brown and Harvard, have also found evidence of the reverse gender gap in US employment rates. In a 2016 paper examining population tax records for children born in the 1980s, these researchers noted, "There is robust evidence that boys who grow up in poor families in highly segregated neighborhoods—i.e., environments of concentrated poverty—have much lower employment rates than girls who grow up in the same environment."²⁴ As one possible explanation for this gap, the paper points to boys turning to crime as an alternative to formal employment.

It's important to note that this reverse gender gap is limited to specific issues and generations in Europe and North America. The traditional gender gap still exists in other parts of the world, where many women continue to be denied access to equal education. And in countries where the reverse gender gap does exist, such as the United States, a gap in pay after graduation still disadvantages women.²⁵ Additionally, the reverse gender gap does not apply to

all school subjects and professional fields. Women continue to be underrepresented in areas like math and science.²⁶

If mainstream institutions aren't able to provide role models and examples of masculinity, young men will increasingly look to alternative sources for that support. Instead of attending classes or doing homework, young men are spending their time on the street, on the internet and with their peers (who are also more likely to be disengaged from school). Young men who do have male role models, like fathers at home, are growing up alongside those who don't, and their peer groups are being shaped by these trends, making this a problem with a far greater reach than any statistic can capture.