Manhood Impossible

Melzer, Scott

Published by Rutgers University Press

Melzer, Scott.
Manhood Impossible: Men's Struggles to Control and Transform Their Bodies and Work.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/60749.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60749

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2174536
In addition to sheer economic anxiety the [unemployed] man suffers from deep humiliation. He experiences a sense of deep frustration because in his own estimation he fails to fulfill what is the central duty of his life, the very touchstone of his manhood—the role of family provider. The man appears bewildered and humiliated. It is as if the ground had gone out from under his feet.

—sociologist Mirra Komarovsky on unemployed men during the Great Depression

By the summer of 2015, the U.S. unemployment rate finally appeared to be heading below 5%, back to prerecession levels. Recession and joblessness stories receded from the nation’s news coverage. New narratives about income inequality and outsourcing captured headlines, prodded both by a decidedly mixed economic recovery and presidential campaign rhetoric. The unemployed, still disproportionately African American and Latinx, younger, and with lower levels of educational attainment, continued to suffer the psychological and social effects of joblessness. Those around them suffered as well.
Even for those no longer experiencing the primary symptom of joblessness, Great Recession–era malignancies proliferate: bankruptcies, mortgage defaults, homelessness, a growing opioid addiction problem, and the amplification of decades-long trends of U.S. underemployment and loss of middle-class jobs. The so-called gig economy, where people cobble together an income doing freelance work (generally without health care or retirement benefits) now includes roughly one in three American workers, or about 53 million people. Perhaps the recovery’s biggest asterisk is the preponderance of low-wage jobs it has produced, along with the seemingly permanent loss of better-paying jobs; as of 2014, in comparison to pre-Recession data, there were 2.3 million more of the former and 1.2 million fewer of the latter. All of these troubling trends have contributed to a spike in suicide rates, driven mostly by big increases among the middle-aged, especially whites and women. Social isolation and lack of help-seeking foster hopelessness and untether some people from society. In 2014, nearly 43,000 Americans took their own lives, up from a recent low of just over 29,000 in the healthier economic times of 1999.

Suicides and even potential media spectacles like murder-suicides of families by depressed failed breadwinners are less likely to capture national media attention since the Recession ended and the unemployment rate returned to historically normal levels. As I began writing this chapter in July of 2015, a quick online search revealed several under-the-radar recent cases of the most tragic lingering effects of the recession: loss of life. The Baltimore area had two murder-suicide cases within three months. One was 47-year-old Julian Roary, a father of 10- and 12-year-old boys living in the small town of Perry Hall, Maryland. Roary had just been let go from his 11-month temporary position as acting human resources manager at the Baltimore City Parking Authority and was facing another bout of unemployment. He could take no more after six years of temporary work, underemployment, and financial problems. A doctorate degree in organizational development apparently wasn’t enough. Roary was angry, frustrated. He believed he was discriminated against because he was in his late 40s and simply felt he could not face another unemployment experience. He is not alone. Researchers have found that suicide rates generally climb during recessions and fall during expansions for people ages 25–64; the Great Recession correlates with a spike in suicides among people ages 40–64. What was even more tragic and unusual, though not unheard of, was that he killed his two young sons before taking his own life. His girlfriend said he wanted his kids to be with him even in death.

Based on my interviews, the unemployed men who do worst are those who fail their own and/or their partner’s breadwinner expectations, whose unemployment creates financial hardships, who are involuntarily unemployed and generally feel a lack of control over their lives, and who are criticized rather than supported by family and friends. They are more likely to feel emasculated
and infantilized, and experience lower self-esteem, guilt, depression, social withdrawal, and weight gain. They sometimes compensate by exhibiting more anger, occasionally fantasize about escaping their situation, and try to find ways to reassert their manhood. They have more conflict with partners and families. In extreme cases not found among the men interview here, failed breadwinners commit deadly acts of violence against family, ex-bosses and coworkers, and even strangers.

All of the men I speak with struggle with the loss of a breadwinner identity and status, or at least an income, to some extent. They define or (as I discuss in chapter seven) redefine manhood so as to emphasize other ways they contribute to their families and communities, including as deeply involved primary caretakers of kids, partners who contribute more housework, money-savers due to their handy work or negotiating skills, and community role models because of their self-described moral behaviors. My research suggests that although some men—especially stay-at-home dads who receive strong support from partners—broaden their definition of manhood beyond being a breadwinner, it is still a key if not defining characteristic of men’s identities.

Sweeping changes brought about by the women’s movement and structural changes in the economy have reshaped gender, work, and family; most partnered men share breadwinning responsibility. But a cultural lag persists in men’s definition of manhood. Being a man continues to be virtually inseparable from paid work, despite sweeping changes to the latter. Most men who do little or no paid work suffer from the economic, emotional, psychological, and physical consequences of unfulfilled expectations and feelings of loss of control. So do their families and communities.

**Internalizing: Down and Out**

Sociologist Mirra Komarovsky’s classic study of long-term unemployed men was published in 1940, just after the Great Depression concluded. The Depression was much deeper and lasted much longer than the Great Recession of 2007–2009, peaking at nearly 25% unemployment in 1933 and staying above 14% for a decade. Many of Komarovsky’s findings (on her sample of native-born, mostly Protestant men forced to rely on social welfare) from eight decades ago are mirrored today. She found that unemployed men were humiliated by being failed providers and having to depend on others, and they experienced greater social isolation, less active sex lives, and in some cases, a loss of respect from their wives. Some turned to alcohol, some became unfaithful to their wives, and at least one man in her study became more physically violent with his children. Komarovsky describes one participant, “Mr. Patterson,” as irritable, morose, disinterested in going out, and unable to sleep: “He feels that there is nothing to wake up for in the morning and nothing to live for.” He
blamed himself for his unemployment, and he often thought about abandon-
ing his family, imagining how much better off they would be without him.

Hobbies and interests were not enough to sustain men during their extended unemployment; their lives revolved around work. Without it, “they faced complete emptiness.” One woman among the many who lost respect for her husband said, “I still love him, but he doesn’t seem as ‘big’ a man.” Many of the men, despite the scope and scale of the Depression, blamed themselves. Some blamed others, scapegoating working wives and “foreigners” for taking jobs that native-born white men felt entitled to: “The Italians, Irish, and colored people somehow get the preference,” one unemployed man complained.

After the recent Great Recession, one study found that about half of unemployed people say they had difficulty sleeping, 4 in 10 report strain in family relationships and loss of contact with friends, one-third say their self-respect had declined, 1 in 5 sought professional assistance due to anxiety or depression, and a small percentage had problems with alcohol or drugs. African Americans and the long-term unemployed were most at risk of experiencing several of these problems simultaneously. My interviews with non-breadwinners produce results similar to Komarovsky’s, with most unwillingly unemployed men feeling humiliated and emasculated by their situation. Many report depression, social withdrawal, and isolation. They also share how they feel infantilized by their economic dependence, reflecting their feelings of masculine incompetence. Eighty years of social change have not blunted the impact of men’s internalization of their breadwinning failings.

Emausculated and Infantilized

“What do you do?” That’s the first question strangers typically ask each other after exchanging names and a pleasantry. For men the only widely acceptable answer continues to be some kind of paid work. As the men I speak with repeatedly emphasize, they are judged as people and men based on what they do. When inquiries are met with “I’m unemployed,” sympathy comes quickly, but it can be followed by a funereal silence.

Frank says some people avoid him as if his condition is contagious, “as if . . . they could catch unemployment through [a handshake] or something, or sitting on the same toilet seat.” All of the unwillingly unemployed men and a few of the men who were stay-at-home dads by choice say they have felt emasculated or infantilized by their non-breadwinner status. Not earning an income leaves them feeling like economically dependent children who live off an allowance. A couple of men candidly express that they feel like women because of their joblessness. When masculinity is constructed in opposition to femininity and breadwinning is equated with masculinity, failed breadwinners may view themselves as the social antithesis of men. They casually equate the dependence inherent to childhood with womanhood.
Tyler’s imprisonment and inability to support his family has undermined their middle-class life and his decision-making input. He sees that his wife needs help and feels guilty that he can’t even support himself, that there’s nothing he can do: “Like shit, when [she and her parents] are having a conversation about paying for my son’s school, I’m . . . I stay quiet, because there’s nothing I can say because I don’t have a dollar to offer them, you know? So it definitely impacts me hard.”

Jonathan’s long-term unemployment strains his marriage with Suzy, as both expect him to be the breadwinner. He says, “I do not feel like a 50-year-old. I feel like a teenager who’s trying to find himself and his place. In my head, I am disappointing and a disappointment to those around me.” He does not feel like an adult, let alone a man: “It gets hard to look [my wife and kids] in the eyes, knowing that they are doing everything expected of them, by family and society, and I am not.” Jonathan says that being jobless means that people discount his opinions, insights, and even values. They “do not see you as a whole person, someone on their level.” He has to borrow money from family members, who provide it with no strings attached, but he keeps a running tally with the intent of paying them back. Despite the rising debt and his state of economic dependence on his wife and others, he says that other than his frustrating employment situation, he has become the man he wanted to become. Jonathan’s sense of self is not entirely dependent on breadwinning.

Frank, 44, says it is “a really big gulf” between unemployment and acceptable manhood—to be in a position where you have no answer to the question, “What do you do?” He says that men’s identities are mostly based on their work or hobbies, and right now, he has neither. It makes him feel “useless” as a father and a husband. His life revolves around food shopping, cooking, and meal scheduling, which he says make him feel like he has undergone a sex change. Frank’s emasculation is symbolic: paid (masculine) work is replaced by devalued and unpaid (feminine) work. His feelings of being infantilized go further. His health has deteriorated since his unemployment, with one consequence being he twice lost control of his bowels. Frank wonders if he is figuratively and literally reverting to infancy.

Young, single, and defeated by the recession, Jordan is among the un/underemployed “boomerang kids,” who return to live with their parents after college. He, too, feels like a child. He says he is a failure for not finding work and, at such a young age, having to give up his passion and his dream of being a forensic psychologist. Instead he has become pragmatic, as well as bitter, frustrated, angry, and depressed. He feels like a textbook definition of a failure, a “loser” who cannot support himself: “My view of a man, of manhood is an individual who is able to strike out and live on his own. Yes, he still maintains ties to those he loves, but he is his own person—financially, emotionally, and intellectually capable and independent. By those standards, I am
The Breadwinner Dilemma

not truly a man yet, and it drives me mad when I think about it.” A lot of one’s self-worth is tied to his or her job, he says, and “without a job, without the independence that the job will grant me, without the earning power, I am not really an adult. I am in a sort of hellish, prolonged junior-adult phase.” At 25, he is eager to have his own income and home, “to make my own way, to start my own family.” Overwhelmed by it all, he says, “I often feel worthless.” He avoids pursuing women because, right now, “there is nothing I can bring to the table.” He mocks what might be his opening line: “Hey baby, I am unemployed, 25 years old, in school, and currently living with my parents. Do you want to go out?”

Liam and Marcus became involved stay-at-home fathers after losing their jobs. Both have supportive and understanding wives, but both men feel a loss of masculine identity due to their joblessness. Liam asks, “You ever see those girls that just have boyfriends that are unemployed and just hang out all day at the apartment? That’s kind of what I felt like. It was just really, really depressing. Because I was raised in a family where the man needs to be the breadwinner, it really kind of takes a toll on you. You start feeling like you’re not really a man anymore.” Marcus feels more like a child than a woman. “In some ways, it’s like being a kid again and having an allowance,” he says, adding, “My wife by all means never makes me feel that way, but it may feel like that sometimes.” He says it hurts to not be able to contribute financially and to put that pressure on his wife. He questions whether he is qualified for jobs similar to the ones he already held. Marcus’s self-esteem has decreased, and he sees his future as uncertain. He experiences pain in not being able to buy his wife a birthday gift from money he earned. He can and does make sure the bills are paid, but it’s his wife’s income that pays them.

Most of those who have chosen to be stay-at-home dads have partners who provide strong financial and emotional support for their arrangement. Still, these men do not do paid work in a culture that says they should. Several say they feel slightly emasculated by their economic dependence. Peter, the adoptive father of three, exemplifies their contradictory experiences. He is grateful to be free to attend his kid’s events and performances, but his ego and identity pay a price. There are days, he says, when he finds himself alone and “[caring] about daytime television more than you ever thought you would.” Sometimes daytime grocery shopping spurs a crisis: “That conscious thought comes back to my head of ‘Oh, my God, why am I not working?’” He says it’s “an every day, every hour thing sometimes.” Like Marcus, Peter “still can’t get my head around” the fact he is not paying any family bills: “And I don’t know if I’m ever going to get around that. I don’t feel like it is my money to spend. I feel like I have to ask.” He anticipated both identity and financial contribution anxieties before quitting his career, but they linger: “If you did
Unemployment Blues and Backlash

100% total, 51% was me giving up who I thought made me, me. And then 49% of it was ‘How am I going to be able to be a husband and partner in this relationship [when] I’m not bringing in a check?’ And ‘Is my wife going to lose respect for me over time, and does that mean my wife will leave me?’ I mean, yeah, it’s a fear. And it’s a fear that, even today, even after a year and a half of being a stay-at-home dad, I still deal with.” Unemployment often produces stress and anxiety, both of which presage a decline in mental and physical health.

Depressed

Depression is common among people who are unemployed, regardless of gender. Indeed, many women may struggle more given their much greater likelihood of being single parents, shouldering all breadwinning and nurturing responsibilities. The masculine breadwinner ideal, though, generates particular feelings of gendered failure for men, even among men in economically secure families. Unemployed people have a 63% greater chance of dying than their employed peers. Unemployment increases men’s mortality rates by more than a third over those of unemployed women, in part due to higher rates of heart attacks, alcohol and drug abuse, smoking, and unhealthy diets. The involuntarily unemployed men I study deal with lowered and low self-esteem, frustration, guilt, shame, weight fluctuation, lethargy, irregular sleep patterns, decreased libido, worsening personal hygiene, and a general decline in mental and physical health, notably anxiety and depression. Stay-at-home dads who are not ideologically committed to being breadwinners experience fewer and much milder effects.

Frank’s long-term unemployment experience has been crippling. He gained so much weight he feels imprisoned within his own body. He does not exercise and often wears his pajamas all day. He has to be reminded by his wife to shower regularly, which, he emphasizes, is “pretty disturbing.” Frank is humiliated and anxious, lacks confidence and self-esteem, and is clinically depressed. He unsuccessfully tried to hide his deteriorating emotional state from family and friends. He says the “anxiety, depression, shame, embarrassment, and stuff” initially was too much to share with his wife: “I’m not one to do this, but I would almost find myself like in tears averaging once every three days [in] midafternoon, if my wife was at work, my daughter’s at school. Just me alone in the house. Just the immensity of everything.” He wears sunglasses to conceal his teary eyes, even on gray northern winter days. Sometimes his dreams consisted of manufactured humiliations, such as public firings and insults by ex-colleagues and bosses. Eventually he found a therapist, was prescribed antidepressants, and found outlets to ameliorate his joblessness. After our conversation, Frank writes me to share some follow-up thoughts:
Although I’m not an expert on suicide nor suicidal people, I did recall a very significant emotion I felt during my unemployment. When you mix anger, depression, despair, frustration and hopelessness together with feelings of loneliness, you reach a point of worthlessness. That’s the nugget that many downtrodden people could relate to. When you mix in the myriad negative emotions to accompany that emptiness, you’ve hit bottom. I also mentioned feeling useless as both a husband and father. This would be the snapping point for many people. When they need to connect most with others they feel they can’t for some reason or another. Some find religion (I did pray at times), strenuous exercise, therapy or just the comfort of family and home. I can say without a doubt that writing [my blog] helped save my life.

Others are not so fortunate. Men are several times more likely to commit suicide than women regardless of the state of the economy. In 2013, approximately 32,000 men and 9,000 women took their own lives.¹⁴ This disparity is due to men’s greater impulsivity, anger and aggression, and expectation for action; fewer emotional outlets; and unemployment’s undermining of masculine selves. Also, men are more likely to use a gun. Joblessness reduces people’s social ties, friendship networks, and adherence to social norms. Men, already less likely to maintain close attachments to others, are two to three times as likely to commit suicide after unexpectedly losing their jobs.¹⁵ This kind of “economic suicide” is a literal escape from his own unacceptable sense of self. Researchers believe the recent global recession accounts for no fewer than 10,000 additional suicides in North America and Europe, nearly 5,000 in the United States alone. The pace of the increase was four times greater for men than women.¹⁶ High unemployment and home foreclosures compound the stress and depression, helping push the suicide rate to 13 per 100,000 in 2013. The rate has been increasing, but it is well below its peak of 22 per 100,000 during the Great Depression.¹⁷ Decades of U.S. economic changes have wrought greater insecurity and a weaker social safety net. Privatization and emphasis on market solutions also contribute to reduced social cohesion.¹⁸ Men are more likely to internalize their inability to be breadwinners and view themselves as personally responsible for their perceived failure. Only a couple of the men I interview report feeling such despair that suicide crossed their minds; these thoughts were fleeting, though, and they were not seriously considered.

Jordan is one of these men. Living with his parents, with no job, no girlfriend, and seemingly no future, his depression morphed into hopelessness. He gave suicide a thought, but not much of one. He sees many of his fellow graduates landing jobs while he cannot find anything in a job market he calls “soul crushing.” He finds it hard to enjoy life because he feels his has been a failure. Fellow twentysomething Tyler has not considered suicide, although he says, “Ever since I went to jail, I’ve had a lot of mental health problems.”
He explains, “I get depressed, and I get anxiety real bad because . . . everything hit me, like, I don’t got anything, I’m in a prison cell. I had no control over the outside world anymore[, over] what [my wife] did or what my kids did. I had no say in anything. So now that I’m out and can’t find a job, it’s hit me even harder.” He’s on medication and seeing a counselor, but the physical pain from his accident and the psychological pain from losing his idyllic life weigh heavily on him. He can’t pick up his kids, and he let down his family: “I’m so damn young, and I was at such a pinnacle in my life. I was—I was somewhere where most people never are . . . I went from extremely high to extremely low. So it kind of pisses me off.”

For Liam, the recession forced him to close his small business, which led to a deep and harmful depression before he recovered from it. Everything in his life, he says, slowly, almost imperceptibly deteriorated. Job searches in his field were fruitless. His libido decreased: “I wasn’t initiating. It’s so cliché but I just wasn’t in the mood, you know?” If not for his wife’s job, he says, his depression would have emerged much sooner. Looking back, thinking about how he was trying to return to work in a field he disliked, he observes, “It was a sad state of my life.” At his nadir, a mid-40s involuntary stay-at-home dad wallowing in a sort of existential crisis, he questioned his past, present, and future life. Recalling those times, he says,

I just walked around in these pajama pants all day. It was crazy. It was . . . I don’t know . . . a slow, insidious kind of depression. My self-esteem was getting lower. I didn’t recognize it at the time. I just thought this was just something that’ll pass or is just a mood I was in or whatever. [Next thing I know,] I’m eight months into it. I was like, “This is something serious.” I mean, it was affecting my relationship with my wife; it was affecting my relationship with my friends. It was just . . . I didn’t want to do anything. I didn’t care about anything. It’s like you were dying very, very slowly, like a cancer or something. It’s just . . . You can’t really describe it. It’s kind of creeping, just there, you know?

His failed attempts to land a job accelerated his downward spiral. “The depression just came on like a tidal wave,” he says. He realized, “Oh, this is not going to be just a temporary little setback. This might be something a little bit more serious.” This pushed him into an existential crisis. He was a failed breadwinner, blanketed by depression: “I was just getting lazy. I can see how housewives of the 1950s started drinking heavily. I can understand that now. It’s pretty damn boring, and it’s tedious, and it’s monotonous; and [sad] to say, that’s the way I was looking at it before I kind of woke up.” Liam’s awakening was realizing the greater importance of doing something that he loves and raising someone whom he loves over merely working a high-earning job. Before then, he says, “It never really even occurred to me that there were other things, more
important things that will define you.” Liam has embraced fatherhood and decided to pursue his dream of making music.

Marcus, too, was forced into being a stay-at-home dad after losing his job. “I’ve been there with the depression,” he says, and “on that cycle where you kind of let yourself go.” The job search is exhausting in all ways. “Sometimes you wake up and you don’t want to do it,” he says, asking himself, “‘All right, what’s today going to hold for me? What am I going to accomplish today? Am I going to get turned down for two or three more jobs today?’ you know, or ‘Am I going to get a break today?’” A few temporary opportunities to make money a year ago helped him feel better. He also thinks about making sure he sets a good example for his young son. He promises himself he will stave off another bout of depression: “I can’t go down that road. I’ve learned self-pity can . . . I mean, you can lose your relationship. You can lose yourself in self-pity if you’re not careful.”

Jerry saw a lot of that in the veteran’s homeless shelter, where alcoholism and depression were common: “You start questioning yourself inside, and you start saying, ‘Who am I? What did I do?’” He sees this as a universal issue, one that is magnified by failure: “I mean, even people who are working full-time in careers, it nags on them, you know—are they accomplishing what they need to accomplish in life? And when you get to the point where you get homeless, I guess it’s like, yeah, you can really feel like you’re losing yourself, losing your identity.”

Socially Withdrawn
Depression, shame, social withdrawal, and isolation are mutually reinforcing—a sort of closed loop but one that impossibly only descends, like an Escher staircase. As with depression, unwilling non-breadwinners are more likely than voluntary stay-at-home dads to withdraw from social interactions, with a few exceptions in both groups. The shame and depression sometimes cause men to retreat from friends and family, avoid social events, and even conversations altogether. Fathers do not seem to stop interacting with their kids, who often provide relief from unemployment. Some men conceal their fears and anxieties from their partners, but most do not withdraw from them.

Stay-at-home dad Peter and long-term unemployed father Frank feel compelled to hide some of their anxieties and problems from their wives, knowing the consequences for themselves and their relationships. Regarding his transition out of the workforce, Peter says, “Over time I’ve been able to feel more comfortable expressing my frustrations to Regina without feeling like I’m demeaning myself.” He still hesitates, though, to share with her his moments of emasculation and diminished self-worth. In his eyes, this would merely highlight and reconfirm his inadequacies as a husband and man. He says that even though he is in a great marriage, he’s “still carrying that consciousness of
‘I’m less of a man ’cause I’m not working.’ And so do you really want to talk to your wife about not working?” Peter also does not feel he can talk to his employed friends, who tend to either tease him and joke about what they see as his cushy situation or, he senses, quietly assume something is wrong with him. “It’s somewhat isolating because [you lose] your support network that you would normally have [if you were working],” he says.

Similarly, Frank says he has retreated within himself during his unemployment. He did not share his feelings with his wife “to protect her from a lot of the ugly stuff that was going on between the [lack of] job, the bills, the finances, the house situation, potential bankruptcy. Yeah, I was definitely trying to keep that on my shoulders and not hers.” Withdrawing only bred resentment. Frank also noticed that some of his friends and family tended to call and check on him less frequently when times were toughest, further isolating him.

All of Liam’s relationships were affected by his unemployment. “I didn’t really like hanging out anymore,” he says. “I just wanted to go to bed and go to sleep. I kind of came to accept it. And when you do that, when you accept that, it’s a death sentence.” Phil’s move to the South leaves him partially dependent on his wife not just for income but for friendship networks as well. He says they mostly socialize with his wife’s work colleagues, which means “there are always so many conversations about work and the job market and bosses, and it literally, I mean, I almost want to go, ‘Hey I’m just going to go play with the dog while you all talk about that,’ because I have nothing to give to those conversations.” Phil says he doesn’t feel ostracized—there’s no malice in their conversation—but he “just [isn’t] part of that world anymore.” Cindy, ever supportive, declines some invitations that portend work-filled conversation. “I don’t want anything to do with that,” Phil says. It was women (mostly as a group) who felt excluded from this dinner-party career talk in decades past. Today, a mixed-gender gathering of professionals marks Phil as the sole outlier. He is not in touch with his friends as much either, which he attributes entirely to his unemployment: “Maybe that’s a subconscious . . . my sense of worth has gone down or my sense of accomplishment, or I think I should be . . . I [should have] achieved more at this stage of my life, and therefore at some subconscious level, I’m ashamed. I don’t know.”

Most of the unemployed men have supportive partners who help them navigate their situations and keep them connected. Single men like Jordan and T. J. must actively seek support from others to stave off complete isolation. Jordan says he has done fairly well, but there have been moments when the shame causes him to avoid going out with and talking to employed friends (“I mean real talking, not Facebooking.”). Withdrawing and staying in is a temporary escape, but do it too often and the consequences are severe. T. J., divorced and barely making ends meet, is isolated because he is single, recently retired from the military, and living in a state where he lacks a support network.
He says the first year of unemployment was the toughest. He was the most depressed then because he “kind of detached” from his ex-colleagues after retiring, was no longer active or keeping busy, and lacked other social groups. He is bipolar, prone to depression, and required physicians’ assistance to manage his symptoms that first year. Today, T. J. still has trouble with depression and sits around a lot, tired and unmotivated. “Even to walk 10 feet to do dishes, let alone go outside . . .” he says, the thought trailing off as if it’s too much to bear. He closes himself off in his home, often not speaking with people “because you’re not on the same level as they are.” Depressed, but not embittered or jealous, T. J. says, “I’ve gone through that pretty good: your first thoughts are [that] you’re totally different because they’re working, going on vacations, and you’re growing gray hair and rotting. There’s such a contrast. But I’ve learned not to be mad at them. That’s their situation, and I’m happy for them. I don’t wish this on anybody.”

Unemployed men who perceive themselves (or are perceived by others) as failures are likely to experience social psychological and health consequences. A sense of emasculation, reduced self-esteem, and depression are common. Withdrawing from others provides a temporary cocoon from the pain, but ultimately only reinforces their isolation. For most men, other than some unintentional sabotaging of intimate relationships due to their social withdrawal, they confine their unemployment problems to themselves. They internalize their breadwinner failings.

Internalizing a sense of failure, feeling worthless, being moved to tears, and suffering from depression—these all threaten men’s identities. However, in a sense, many of these men are doing what’s expected of them when they conceal their pain and suffering from others. They are doing a manhood act when they “suck it up” and bottle up their (feminine-marked) emotions. This behavior is ultimately self-destructive. It is physically, psychologically, and relationally unhealthy; conforming to masculine ideals often is, especially so when men do masculinity under circumstances where they have limited or no access to economic power or control. Another set of situated manhood acts arise from positions of powerlessness: externalizing behaviors. These include compensating via anger, escape, and reassertion—and, all too often, violence.

**Nonviolent Compensation**

In 1983, actor Michael Keaton played Jack Butler in the film “Mr. Mom,” a comedy about an auto industry engineer who loses his job during a recession. This forces his stay-at-home wife, Caroline, to return to the paid labor force and leaves Jack at home to take care of their kids and house. Working moms were unexceptional then, but the film’s title and Keaton’s over-the-top
portrayal of an emasculated “househusband” betrays the gendered baggage attached to housework and childcare, as well as men’s unemployment.

In a funny scene illustrating compensatory manhood, Ron, Caroline’s boss, arrives at her and Jack’s house in a limousine to pick her up for their work trip to California. Caroline excitedly runs upstairs, presumably to make herself more attractive for the fancy car service. Jack, looking disheveled and unmanly in his robe and aware that Ron might be a threat, scampers away from the window when he sees Ron confidently strolling toward the house in an expensive suit. Jack returns to greet Ron wearing overalls and protective goggles while revving a chainsaw. Jack and Ron begin posturing. Jack offers Ron a beer. Ron points out that it is seven o’clock in the morning. Jack waits a beat and offers a scotch. Ron, knowing Jack lost his job, says he cannot drink during working hours, then immediately and disingenuously apologizes for being insensitive about Jack’s unemployment, patronizingly calling him “pal” and touching Jack’s shoulder in a gesture of faux-consolation. Jack then guides Ron into the living room to tell Ron about his plans to use his time off from work to build an addition on the home. Jack says he is going to knock down some walls and do the rewiring himself. Ron asks him if he’s going to use “220” for the wiring, the other option implicitly being 110 volts. Jack’s complete lack of knowledge is exposed. But he’s too deep into the lie and his masculine posturing to retreat, so he plunges ahead nonsensically, delivering one of the funniest lines in the movie: “Yeah, 220, 221. Whatever it takes.”

Keaton’s charisma and charm make Jack Butler’s cringeworthy compensatory behaviors not only funny but accessible and understandable. We’ve all been or known the guy who, when feeling emasculated for some reason, only further embarrasses himself in some futile, failed attempt to reassert manhood. Some of these behaviors are sadly funny, especially the awkward cinematic versions. However, loss of face and loss of work can produce more serious compensatory manhood acts. If men’s sense of internalized failure lasts long enough and is difficult enough, if they are unable to repair what ails them, they resort to any number of nonviolent or violent actions in an attempt to restore their masculine selves.

A large and growing body of literature reveals how men, both individually and subculturally, attempt to compensate for various perceived shortcomings. Researchers have found that men of all backgrounds use an array of compensatory manhood acts when they do not fulfill hegemonic masculine ideals, but gay men, female-to-male transmen, economically marginalized men, men of color, immigrants, and other systematically subordinated and marginalized men are structurally located in positions that elicit more of these responses. Men compensate by drinking heavily, posturing and getting in fights, bodybuilding, participating in sports and risk-taking activities,
committing crimes, pursuing sexual conquests, practicing infidelity, doing less housework, segregating themselves from women, attacking and punishing other men’s feminine displays, demeaning women when they are not around, and even verbally, sexually, and physically assaulting and abusing women, sometimes killing them. Merely referencing, describing, or bragging about some of the above sometimes suffices as a compensatory act.

Most often, men do these things because they feel discredited due to body or breadwinner failings. They attempt to restore their masculine selves—whether violently or nonviolently, depending on what resources they can usher—via actions that are intended to place them higher up the masculine hierarchy. At minimum, they distinguish themselves from the subordinated status of woman and a feminine identity, thereby reproducing gender inequality. Note that women exist as objects of men’s competition (and not unusually, bragging), even in the seemingly harmless, funny example portrayed by Keaton. In some cases, as when unemployed men use violence against woman partners to reclaim interpersonal power, the patriarchal agenda is conscious and explicit. Other times, as when gay men emphasize big bodies and muscles, the devaluation and subordination of women and femininity are merely implicit.

Expressions of anger, escape fantasies, and rhetorical reassertions are three nonphysically violent compensatory responses of the non-breadwinning men I interview. Stay-at-home dads may have even more reason than unemployed men to compensate given their doubly stigmatized roles as both unemployed and caregiving men. Negative feelings are usually offset, though, by those who choose this role and embrace an alternative definition of manhood.

Expressing Anger

Jack Butler’s anxiety about the state of his marriage is an all-too-real experience for several unemployed men I interview. Anthony, emasculated by his so-called alpha wife and his long-term employment struggles, teeters between depression and anger. Along with the possibility his marriage may end in divorce, his dissatisfaction with not working causes him to “internalize depression and then explode with anger sometimes,” he says. He is unable to relinquish control, perhaps especially to a woman. “Well, here I am, a man having to rely on a woman and it’s not a good feeling at all, and it’s a very helpless feeling,” he says, labeling it unhealthy and paralyzing: “It affects how I feel as a man, and it affects my freedom of where I could go or what I could do in life.”

Stay-at-home dad Henry’s longtime arrangement with his wife broke down when, according to him, her progressive views shifted and she began to resent his unemployment. Before her change of heart, he had fully embraced his status and identity, but their impending divorce has led him to experience a lot of anger. He says, “I’m mad because, right now, I’m almost 50 and I have no
stability. Economy sucks. All the jobs I used to do, I’m either physically not capable [of doing] them or those jobs are gone. You can’t [work those jobs] and make $50,000 a year anymore, you know. Those jobs are all gone.” Henry’s wife accuses him of being angry, but he sees only depression.

Frank says “anger really rose to the top of the list” of his emotions at the peak of his unemployment and marital struggles: “I would say that’s one of the biggest transformations: [I’m] very, very defensive. There’s no such thing as a lighthearted remark. I took everything personal, and I responded to everything. If my wife said, ‘I was just kidding’ or [said] things I usually just let go or roll off my back, I was firing right back.” He says that at times, he and his wife have been so flooded with emotions over his unemployment and their financial difficulties that they can’t communicate. He, too, thinks his anger was a source of compensation and a way to disguise his depression. Given the fruitlessness of his job searches, he experiences his wife’s regular, hopeful inquiries as demoralizing reminders of his failures. “She’s just trying her best to stay [positive],” he says, “But within 20 minutes [of returning home from a busy day applying for jobs,] I can go from feeling relatively productive and good to just being squashed because, bottom line, I don’t have a job.” Frank’s unemployment blog generated a lot of anonymous comments, mostly supportive and positive, though some criticized him for his physical and psychological deterioration, questioning his masculinity and resilience. He summarizes those criticisms: “Yeah, ‘Man up, be the breadwinner, be the logical one, there’s no time for depression or anxiety or anything like that. Just calm down and be the ruler of the house’ was the basic message. Yeah, easy for you to say! If I could reply it would be ‘OK, so, at the third year mark, are you allowed to feel a little angry or frustrated?’ I mean, I don’t know what the cutoff point is.” Frank takes note of stories of unemployed men who escaped their circumstances by committing suicide, often leaving children and families behind. He says that although he sympathizes with their plights, he cannot imagine abandoning his daughter. His feelings of failure manifest themselves in depression and anger.

Long-term unemployed husband Phil more explicitly connects his anger to what amounts to a compensatory response to joblessness: “I’m tired of people saying, ‘Oh, Phil, what are you doing these days?’ I don’t know. I can’t say I’m working . . . and I can’t say I got a promotion; I can’t say I’m working on this great project.” He has exceeded the limits of his patience: “I think I’m turning very much into an authoritarian. You know, ‘Great, I’ll listen to you, but at the end of the day, you know what? It’s my decision. Get the hell away from me, I don’t have time for this.’ I don’t know what it is, but I’ve become much more aggressive . . . in just making sure that the things I can control are controlled. You know, because maybe it’s that I can’t control my job aspect [of my life], I can’t control my professional world, [but] I can control this. If I’m an asshole sitting in your office negotiating this, I don’t have a problem with that. These
are things that I can control to help save money, for me to contribute a little bit financially.” When Phil was teased by a family member about being unemployed he says, “I didn’t say it, but I felt [like saying], ‘Screw you.” He says it upsets him, but he blows it off if family members make jokes at his expense. “But I’ve gotten to the point where I would not let that go if it was just a casual acquaintance,” he says, although he believes he would do so tactfully rather than confrontationally. “It all stems from a very kind of deep feeling of ‘You know what? Just because I’m unemployed doesn’t mean I’m useless,’” he says. Phil believes he proves his worth as a man in part by doing projects and work around the house, tapping into a blue-collar, physical masculinity to offset the loss of his white-collar breadwinner status.

Nonviolent anger bubbles up from the frustrations of long-term joblessness and a sense of loss of power and control. In Phil’s case, he channels that anger into an aggression and assertiveness that provides him with more control over his environment. In Frank’s case, the uncontrolled expression of anger is viscerally restorative. Both men restore their masculine identities, perhaps only briefly, by attempting to assert dominance using their feelings of anger.

**Fantasizing about Escaping**

Another nonviolent compensatory behavior is to have fantasies of temporarily escaping the harsh reality of unfulfilled masculine ideals. Recall that some Gentlemen’s Fighting Club members fantasize about possessing superhero powers and enjoying unlimited control over their all-too-normal bodies and physical abilities. The fantasies of depressed non-breadwinning men are circuitously restorative; instead of fantasizing about newfound wealth and success, some men imagine leaving their families and simply eliminating their familial breadwinner responsibilities. None actually do so, but that the thought occurs to several of them is revealing. The daily, even hourly reminders and pressures of not fulfilling the most fundamental responsibility our society assigns to fathers can be unbearable. No person can occupy that space long term without enduring severe consequences. If men cannot eliminate that feeling of failure by either finding work or uncoupling breadwinning and ideal manhood, they may consider alleviating it by escaping the situation. This was common during the Great Depression, when many men abandoned their families. Some committed suicide. The national rate spiked to more than 22 per 100,000 in 1932.22 Others just walked away. A 1940 poll found that 1.5 million married women had been abandoned by their husbands.23 Younger and older men alike have been fleeing from breadwinner expectations ever since.24

For several non-breadwinning men, including Frank, Liam, and Anthony, the job market and their situations were so bleak at times that they considered mentally and physically checking out. They entertained several possibilities: taking a permanent one-way trip, entering a psychiatric facility, or committing
suicide. These fantasies contrast sharply with those of emasculated GFC members, who envision playing superhero in the streets. It begs the question why Frank, Liam, and Anthony don’t slip into comparable economic fantasies where they are rich and accomplished, their status and identity repaired and restored. This seems even more surprising given that, as prevalent as superhero culture is, it is dwarfed by Americans’ dreamy obsessions with wealth and success.

Depression is the most likely reason these unemployed men don’t escape into heroic breadwinning fantasies. Frank, Liam, and Anthony’s fantasies of escaping their breadwinner responsibilities coincide with paralyzing depression and a sense of hopelessness. Perhaps some GFC members felt a similar paralysis during their boyhood or young adulthood because of their lack of physical agency, but their feelings were likely less grave and more isolated. Other people were not depending on them to embody manhood.

Liam’s forced unemployment and involuntary role as stay-at-home dad sent him into a tailspin. Deeply depressed at his lowest point, he says,

> I don’t think I had suicidal thoughts but I thought about just walking away from everything; just walking away, just going somewhere. I didn’t have a place to go, didn’t have a destination, but I really didn’t want to be where I was at. It popped in my head. And once it pops in your head, you bring it around and around again, almost like a merry-go-round. It goes away for a little bit but it comes right back around. Thank God I knew it for what it was. I was like, “This is not an option; you just can’t walk away from your problems. That’s not a way to solve problems. Is that the way you want your [son] to see you solve problems—that you walk away from them? No. You have to persevere and push through.” I kind of just stuck it out. Talking about walking away, that was … When I look back, that just sounds so childish and immature. I mean, how could you even entertain a thought like that, just walking away? It’s crazy.

In part, Liam’s familial support and a growing love and appreciation for being a parent prevented him from acting upon his fantasy. If his unemployment lasted many years, as was common during the Depression, perhaps he and others would more seriously entertain an escape.

Anthony says he sometimes fantasized about “getting on a bus with a load of money and taking off to someplace I’ve never been to before. But of course, I never really would do that. It’s crossed my mind, but I wouldn’t do that. It’s just a fantasy, you know, an escape from the everyday ho-hum of life.” He identifies other ways he psychologically escapes, namely, his increased viewing of pornography. Drugs and alcohol are also commonly used to dull unemployed men’s pain and help them psychologically escape feeling worthless and depressed.25
The only non-breadwinner who literally, if temporarily, escaped his situation was Mika. He was retired military turned stay-at-home father. The transition was difficult. His wife’s budding career meant they had to move soon after he retired, so he lacked friends in his new community, let alone other stay-at-home dads with whom to connect: “Everybody else in the neighborhood who stayed home were women. So I think there was like a big sense of isolation. It was my first time having to deal with that, with not having a support group. And I think I did it for nine months and then, you know, I went off to Iraq for a year to be a contractor. And it put our daughter into daycare. Being a stay-at-home dad was really tough. So maybe it was an escape for me.” I ask him if living on a base while retired also left him on the outside of the soldier and warrior culture and community and if he desired to reclaim that position. “Wow, yeah, you hit the nail on the head,” he says. “I’ve always had an adventuresome spirit, you know, to go places, see places. And you know, being around these people, hearing their war stories, they just added to it. It was like, ‘Man, I got to go!’” Mika’s literal escape from being the primary caretaker of an infant and not doing paid labor was a decision he arrived at with his wife. Upon his return, he resumed his new role as the at-home parent but enjoyed more support from other family and newfound friends. He felt compelled to prove himself one more time in a war zone, in no small part because of the lack of masculine rewards he received from caring for his child.

Reasserting Manhood

Another way to nonviolently attempt to restore a sense of control is to reassert manhood via claims or actions. Responses to American racism provide many examples. African Americans have countered their experiences of dehumanization and accompanying atrocities and oppression by whites—from slavery to Jim Crow segregation and lynchings to racial profiling, mass incarceration, and police brutality—by collectively and individually asserting their dignity and humanity. Sometimes this was gendered, as when black men responded to whites calling them “boys” by asserting “I Am a Man” before and during the Civil Rights era or when Sojourner Truth famously delivered her “Ain’t I a Woman?” abolitionist challenge to an audience of mostly white women suffragists. The Black Lives Matter movement that emerged in response to police violence shines light on a long-standing problem of police violence that activists emphasize has been ignored because of the United States’ indifference to the plight of African Americans.

Another example is how people respond to being made to feel invisible. Ralph Ellison’s nameless narrator and protagonist in his 1953 novel *Invisible Man* symbolically confronts the phenomenon of black men’s experiences of invisibility.²⁶ Today, ours is a culture where wealth is publicized and celebrated,
individual identity is sacred, and the importance of visibility can be observed in everything from the commodification of fame to the ubiquity of selfies. Being made invisible because of your race or ethnicity, social class standing, or both invites the unseen to loudly and publicly reassert themselves. This helps explain why flashy cars, nice clothes, loud jewelry, and a “look at me” attitude and lifestyle are common among those with the fewest resources and low status. And let’s face it: it’s mostly men who gravitate to these kinds of displays. Success, accomplishment, status, and control are inextricably linked with manhood. When billionaires publicly joust with each other over their respective fortunes (as did Mark Cuban and Donald Trump during Trump’s campaign), it should come as no surprise that people with little money try to make claims to high status and assert that they are worthy of not only acknowledgment but respect and dignity.27

Non-breadwinning men sometimes feel and are made to feel like less than men. So they reassert themselves by making various claims to manhood. Sometimes these men simply want to verbally challenge those who think their employment status undermines their manhood. Stay-at-home dad Ryan uses avoidance, sarcasm, and direct challenges to combat others’ ignorance or negative assumptions. When people “roll their eyes” at him when he tells them he’s a stay-at-home dad, he says, “There’s many times where I’ve wanted to sort of fight against that, like I wanted to stand up for myself and just sort of fight these assumptions.” Other times, he thinks, “You don’t have to get it. It doesn’t matter to me if you get it because my wife does and, you know, me being a stay-at-home dad doesn’t mean everything that you think it means.”

Anthony and Marcus are involuntarily unemployed at-home parents. Anthony finds himself asserting his status to his daughter: “I’m afraid that she’s going to see men as weak or as not being providers, and that worries me. And I had to tell her [when she made an innocent comment or inquiry], you know, I work around the house. I do the dishes, the laundry, I cut the lawn, I take out the garbage, I pick you up, you know. It’s not like I’m not doing anything around here. And I had to patiently tell her that. So that worries me.” Anthony would prefer to be the breadwinner, but he finds value and importance in his role as stay-at-home father. Marcus is even more intent on returning to paid work: “The way things are now, it’s not normal, and it’s not OK, and it sometimes doesn’t feel OK. Sometimes you feel you have to kind of, well, you want to assert yourself, like, ‘Hey, I’m still a father, I’m still a man. I still live and breathe.’ And you feel sometimes that you’re less than other people.”

Jamie is a white, gay, partnered 34-year-old father of two young kids. He left his career to be the full-time stay-at-home parent but did so with trepidation. Gay stereotypes and prejudices have “always been an issue for me,” he says. They have obstructed his sense of gender identity. When he was in his early
20s, he provided customer service phone support. Callers would sometimes mistake him for a woman because of his name and feminine-sounding voice, so he took up smoking to deepen his voice and began going by “J. P.” instead of Jamie. Eventually, with counseling, he realized, “I needed to be OK with who I was” as a first step, before expecting others to accept him. Quitting his career to raise kids—“doing a very nontypical male role”—brought judgment from others and reopened old identity wounds. Jamie compensates for his perceived feminine, devalued, unpaid work by emphasizing its masculine characteristics, as well as highlighting and focusing on his education. “I’m still a leader,” he says, “I’m just a leader of the household. I’m still very aggressive because I still set goals [for] myself, regardless of if it’s with the kids, or it’s something we need to do for the family, or if it’s something with myself [educationally], I still am aggressive in reaching my goals.” He immediately returned to school after quitting his job, which has bridged his transition out of his career and buffeted him as he grapples with childcare. He says,

I think if I didn’t [take classes], I probably would go crazy. I mean, it originally started as having something on my résumé [for] when I went back into the workforce, but it really became—it’s really become something that I really feel that I need. I need [it] in order to have that other outlet, you know, to take these different classes and learn new things and kind of be thinking in a different mind-set, versus you know, “Did I wash the bottles? Did I put the sippy cup out? Do I need to go to the store to buy baby food? Do I have diapers?”

Jamie says he is a lot more comfortable with where he’s at in his life now that he is so heavily invested in his education. He has also weathered some challenging parenting problems, which has made him appreciate fatherhood more. But it’s clear that Jamie feels compelled to reassert his masculine identity due to his unemployment.

Without a breadwinner’s income, status, or identity, some men use their bodies to reassert their masculinity. This strategy has become more common in a postindustrial American economy populated by a roughly equal number of women and men.28 Men’s work has become a more tenuous source of manhood. Men can signify manhood by wielding and leveraging their bodies in various ways: building them up; using them for competition, sport, and violence; talking about their bodies as sexual tools that are used to control others; consuming excessive amounts of food and alcohol; and practicing stoicism by not complaining about pain or injuries.29 Aggressive posturing and discourse can also substitute for feeling disempowered. Unemployed father Anthony says he occasionally resorts to anger and shouting to compensate for his non-breadwinner status, explaining,
Sometimes I feel I have to assert myself, but you know, it usually just causes an explosive confrontation, and I really don’t like to play the macho role. It kind of goes against my nature. I don’t think I should have to. It’s not who I am, and when I do try to assert myself, it just . . . the results were nothing that I would want to keep. You know, it would only be bad feelings. Because, really, basically, I’d just be overcompensating for feeling bad at someone else’s expense, so it’s not worth it. I just try to be who I am.

There are more indirect approaches to reasserting masculinity via bodies, including secretly cheating on partners and avoiding or refusing to do housework. Long-term unemployed married men Jonathan and Phil take the opposite tacks on these respective issues, seeking greater intimacy and taking on more housework. Jonathan says, “My libido has in fact increased, as I seek to be ‘satisfying’ [sexually] since I have not been in my employment and ability to provide.” His wife’s libido, though, has decreased as his unemployment has dragged on.

Phil has been using his free time to work on the fixer-upper house he and Cindy bought. He is intent on making some sort of contribution to the household, motivated both by a need to assert himself and an unhealthy amount of guilt. He says Cindy’s positive attitude reinforces his desire not to let her down. When they met and married, he was “financially stable” and she “never bargained for” him being unemployed, “so maybe it’s just simply that these are things I can do; I have control over this so I need to keep the yard looking good, I need to work on the house, I need to have a big flower garden. I need to do that.” Jonathan and Phil try to use their bodies to reassert a sense of control, channeling their economic emasculation into being more attentive partners. Conversely, Anthony sometimes uses anger to reassert his status.

Although compensatory manhood acts are adaptive behaviors—they are, after all, attempts to restore what men feel they’ve lost—these actions can also be self-destructive. A third type of response proves corrosive solely or primarily for the boys and men engaging in it. Putting on a “cool pose” or conforming to a “code of the street” that revolves around fearless toughness may undermine young (disproportionately poorer, African American and Latino) men’s commitment to and progress in school. Similarly, joining gangs and committing crimes are ultimately self-destructive actions sometimes done in response to feeling emasculated. Many men also try to reassert their threatened masculinity by engaging in various risk-taking activities. They jeopardize their health and well-being by drinking excessively, drinking and driving, engaging in extreme sports, avoiding health care, and many other ways in which they can use their bodies to prove their toughness and, however provisionally, gain a sense of control. There are a range of adverse health effects for
being non-breadwinning men that vary by social location. One study found that men with the highest incomes are most adversely affected by being secondary earners.  

Men’s attempts to reassert their masculinity by using and controlling their bodies or situations, fantasizing about escaping, and expressing anger result in various outcomes. Some of these attempts are merely rhetorical, others actually can benefit men and their relationships, and still others, for the most part, only negatively impact men themselves. The most pernicious and devastating compensatory manhood acts are various forms of interpersonal violence. Controlling and dominating others’ bodies is a distressingly common means of reasserting masculinity.

**Compensatory Masculine Violence**

Men commit more than 8 out of 10 violent crimes, including nearly 9 out of 10 murders and almost all rapes. Their motivations for doing so are as diverse as the men themselves. However, a large and growing number of studies have found that men’s violence is often compensatory—a response to feeling disempowered, shamed, the victim of an injustice. The most common sources of adult men’s feelings of disempowerment and shame are threats to their breadwinner status and identity. Research on economically marginalized men of various racial and ethnic groups find that beyond relying on sports or sexual conquests, fighting and violence are common ways to signify and attempt to restore, to realign themselves with, ideal manhood.

Compensatory masculine violence knows no bounds. The targets and victims may be strangers, acquaintances, or intimates of any gender, one person or as many as the perpetrator can victimize. The types of violence include physical and sexual, from bar fights and street violence to intimate partner violence, rape, and sexual assault, and even mass shootings and acts of terrorism. The human toll is costly. It, too, takes many forms—physical, psychological, lethal.

Whether men are individually or collectively unable to fulfill breadwinner expectations, one all-too-common response is to use violence against women to reassert their authority. Issei, or first-generation Japanese Americans, lost not only their possessions and freedoms when the U.S. government interred them during World War II but also their status and authority within their families. Their American-born children, the Nisei (second) generation, lost respect for the Issei. Some Issei men gave up on maintaining power and control in the family, internalizing a sense of failure and becoming lethargic and hopeless. Others compensated by using violence against their woman partners.

Contemporary research on violence in intimate relationships finds that men often use violence to compensate for their failed breadwinner status, whether due to being unemployed, doing “women’s work,” or simply earning
much less than woman partners. Revealingly, the opposite phenomenon does not seem to occur: there is no compensatory feminine violence. Women who earn much less than men partners, who work in gender-non-conforming jobs, or who are unemployed do not attempt to assert their status by using violence against men. They have no need to as either they are not violating gendered norms (when they earn less or do not do paid work) or the masculine-typed work they do is more highly valued. Either way, control is not an essential expectation for womanhood, and violence is neither expected nor rewarded.

Sometimes men’s violence is directed at targets outside of the home, whether specific individuals or groups are identified as sources of grievance. The slang term *going postal*, which was coined following a string of post office shootings in the 1980s and ’90s, is now used generically for workplace shootings by disgruntled former employees. Workplace homicides have increased from only 15 in 1982 to around 800 per year. Men commit well over 9 out of 10 murder-suicides in the United States, an even higher proportion than homicides. Many murder-suicides follow severe financial stress, usually unemployment, with the perpetrators most often killing family members or workplace colleagues before taking their own lives. Masculine identity crises are common among school shooters (due partly to failed bodies) and domestic terrorists (usually older, motivated more by failed breadwinning). They often exhibit a masculine rage that they attempt to resolve through violent behavior; a fetish for guns and weapons compounds their violent potential.

In 2009, 22-year-old Richard Poplawski became a domestic terrorist. He shot and killed three Pittsburgh police officers and seriously wounded two others. Poplawski and his mother had gotten into an argument at home about a pet dog urinating on the carpet, one of many shouting matches between them. She called 9-1-1 to have him removed from her home. The responding officers had no idea Poplawski was heavily armed and had donned a bullet-proof vest in anticipation of their arrival. He’d also been following and falling further down the right-wing rabbit hole of government conspiracy theories, anti-Semitism, and racism. Poplawski was expecting—eagerly anticipating, really—a race war: “If a total collapse is what it takes to wake our brethren and guarantee future generations of white children walk this continent, if that is what it takes to restore our freedoms and recapture our land: let it begin this very second and not a moment later.” As is all too common, Poplawski’s virulent racist fears and anxieties, along with his belief that the government was conspiring to remove citizens’ first and second amendment rights, were stoked by extremist websites and organizations. His personal failures and frustrations likely acted as an accelerant for the fire. He grew up in a violent, deeply troubled home, ultimately living with his grandparents, including a racist grandfather who abused his mom and grandmother and fired off guns in their home on more than one occasion. As an adult, Poplawski was issued and violated a
legal order to stay away from an ex-girlfriend (after going to her place of work and unsuccessfully proposing to her).

Just a few years out of high school, he had failed to fulfill multiple career goals he’d set. He was discharged from the marines after three weeks. He moved away, to Florida, and then had to return home to Pittsburgh. Poplawski’s father said his son told him he moved back because he “was tired of just working to live. He talked to me like a man who was like, ‘Dad, I’m going to make some money, I’m going to make a lot of money, I’m going to find a way to succeed.’ And with his intelligence, I thought he would. I knew he would.” A year later, further removed from his aspirations and even deeper into antigovernment, gun-confiscation paranoia, Poplawski’s failures and fears culminated in deadly violence. Ever so temporarily—and with the ultimate cost to others (and eventually, himself, as he later was sentenced to death)—he restored a sense of control. Poplawski is somewhat atypical in that he was young when he committed his violent act. It has been mostly older and middle-aged white men, those who feel most entitled to viable careers and breadwinner status, who have externalized their feelings of being threatened by women and people of color taking “their” jobs. Economic recessions and bouts of unemployment can be an explosive combination.43

The biographies of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh and many of the terrorists involved in the September 11 attacks were marked by rage, entitlement, and emasculation, fueled in part by economic and professional failures. McVeigh received several medals for his army service in the Persian Gulf War but had to drop out of Special Forces training. His antigovernment ideology was later fed by underemployment, debt, and a strong distaste for federal taxes.

One of the 9/11 terrorist attack leaders and hijackers, Mohamed Atta, was also motivated in part by a lack of career success. He grew up in a modern Egyptian family, the younger brother of two older sisters who would go on to become a medical doctor and a professor. Atta’s father “was the disciplinarian, grumbling that his wife spoiled their bright, if timid, son, who continued to sit on her lap until enrolling at Cairo University. ‘I used to tell her that she is raising him as a girl, and that I have three girls, but she never stopped pampering him,’” he told a reporter after 9/11. He explained that he told his son he “needed to hear the word ‘doctor’ in front of his name . . . We told him your sisters are doctors and their husbands are doctors and you are the man of the family.”44 Humiliation and emasculation marked the biographies of multiple 9/11 terrorists and many others around the world. Just as the forces of globalization create instability, chip away at patriarchal arrangements, and generally threaten the current social order in the United States, they do so with greater effects abroad. Wars and Western occupations compound the impact of globalization, often experienced by non-Western countries as the literal or
symbolic destruction of their cultures and beliefs. Western military, political, economic, and cultural forces push some men in these countries to embrace radical theologies and take up arms against the sources of these threats. For example, the Taliban’s efforts to reinstate patriarchal authority in Afghanistan consists of imposing a rigid separation of spheres whereby not only feminism and gender equality are rolled back but all gendered roles and activities are strictly bifurcated. Violations are often met with violent enforcement.

Interviews with religious-based terrorists around the world reveal that many are animated by a sense of wounded masculinity, often for economic reasons. Terrorism is often a response to humiliation, whether economic, political, religious, or ideological. Compensatory violence restores a sense of manhood; it physically cleanses the feminizing emotion of shame.

Failed breadwinners often internalize or externalize their diminished status, symbolically and literally punishing themselves and others. As the Great Recession receded and job opportunities reemerged, many men returned to the paid labor force. Reclaiming their status as breadwinners, or at least members of the workforce, is a source of repair, closing and healing the wounds of unemployment. Alternatively, some men who were pushed or simply moved out of their breadwinner roles and into those of stay-at-home father come to embrace their new identity. They find greater value in raising and connecting with their kids, whom they tended to neglect some before their transition out of the workforce. Along with it, they transition into different ways of conceptualizing and modeling manhood. They redefine their responsibility, from providing economically to spending quality time with and meeting their children’s basic needs. Ideas and language revolving around being a provider, making sacrifices, and being career-oriented for the benefit of the family are supplanted by a depth of commitment to emotional intimacy, being present, and sacrificing one’s ego and career for the well-being of their partners and families. These men redefine not only their roles but their beliefs about enactments of manhood.