

# The Cracks in the Golden Image: Performance, Pressure, and the Pathologies of Young Men

Suicide, Schools Shooters, and Sexual Deviants



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(Peter DeSalvo, 19, a Sacred Heart University freshman from Basking Ridge, NJ died by suicide in 2020)

We tell ourselves comforting stories about success in America. We celebrate the high school quarterback, the valedictorian, the Ivy League admittee, the promising young athlete. These are our golden boys, seemingly destined to lead, achieve, and thrive, embodying our cultural aspirations. Yet, with unsettling frequency, the headlines tell a different, darker story. **A celebrated college athlete dies by suicide. A well-liked student from a "good" family commits an act of horrific school violence. A privileged young man on a seemingly perfect trajectory faces charges of sexual violation.** How do we reconcile the outward markers of success with these devastating internal collapses or external acts of harm? What happens when shattered expectations become the grim reality for those we assumed were destined for greatness, revealing a profound fragility beneath the sheen?

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To dismiss these incidents as isolated anomalies caused solely by mental illness or access to weapons is to ignore a deeper, more troubling pattern. The convergence of school violence, suicide, and sexual assault among high-performing young men (roughly ages 15-24) points towards a complex interplay of intense societal pressure, often unaddressed psychological or spiritual distress, and frequently, **the destabilizing influence of broken or dysfunctional family structures that fail to provide the necessary grounding in character, virtue, and resilience.** An examination of numerous cases, drawn from news reports, court records, and academic studies, reveals that the polished exterior too often masks a fragile interior, vulnerable to fracture under pressure. **The very drive for excellence, when detached from a solid foundation of character, relational health, and transcendent (eternal) purpose, can itself become a catalyst for crisis, suggesting a hollowness in our modern conceptions of flourishing.**

I'm seriously considering writing a book on this someday.

## The Path to Despair: Suicide Among High-Achievers

Consider the immense weight placed upon performance in contemporary American culture. Young men are increasingly measured by their achievements – the GPA, the athletic scholarship, the acceptance letter, the career trajectory. Success becomes not just a goal, but the primary measure of identity and worth, often eclipsing the cultivation of inner virtue or relational depth. This relentless focus on external validation creates a precarious foundation. **When identity is solely constructed around being the "star player" or the "top student," any perceived failure can feel catastrophic, an existential threat rather than a setback, particularly if there is no deeper, spiritual anchor providing intrinsic worth.**

We see this tragically illustrated in cases like **Harry Miller**, the Ohio State football player (Columbus, OH) who retired in 2022 after bravely revealing suicidal ideation, driven by the intense pressure to maintain perfection both athletically and academically. Similarly, the 2022 suicide of **Grant DuBose**, a Stanford University soccer player and computer science student (Stanford, CA), highlighted the often-hidden mental toll of elite competition coupled with academic demands. They represent a broader pattern where the pursuit of excellence, unmoored from a deep sense of purpose or identity found perhaps in faith or stable, loving relationships, becomes a crushing burden. Families, sometimes caught up in the reflected glory of their son's success, may inadvertently prioritize performance over presence, achievement over affection, overlooking or minimizing signs of deep emotional or spiritual struggle—a failure to nurture the soul alongside the resume.

This pressure cooker environment often breeds profound isolation. The cultural expectation of masculine stoicism prevents many young men from admitting vulnerability for fear of appearing weak, a distortion of true strength. Add the specific pain of social stigma or identity struggles, particularly when met with disapproval or rejection from family or peers, and the isolation intensifies. The tragic 2010 suicide of **Tyler Clementi** (Rutgers University, Piscataway, NJ), following online humiliation,

the struggles of young men like **Carlos Vigil** (New Mexico, suicide 2013), facing bullying and familial rejection, underscore how external hostility intersects with internal turmoil. In a culture increasingly defined by digital interactions and weakening traditional communities (family, church, local associations), young men may lack the robust, embodied support systems necessary to navigate rejection or internal confusion. The family, ideally the first bastion of belonging and unconditional love, sometimes becomes another source of judgment or neglect. The post-COVID landscape, with its documented increases in social disconnection and academic stress, likely exacerbated these trends, contributing perhaps to the despair seen in cases like **Jake Anderson** (UW-Madison, suicide 2020) or **Mark Kim** (MIT, suicide 2020).

## When Pain Turns Outward: School Shootings and Family Failure

When internal pressure, isolation, and perhaps a profound sense of grievance, nihilism, or spiritual emptiness become unbearable, the consequences can turn devastatingly outward. School shootings represent a catastrophic failure – of the individual's moral compass, certainly, but also often of the family and community systems meant to instill respect for human life (*Imago Dei*) and provide guardrails against destructive impulses. Examining perpetrators, even high-performing ones, often reveals patterns where untreated mental health issues festered within environments marked by **significant family dysfunction** – emotional distance, neglect, abuse, divorce, or a failure to recognize and address escalating warning signs of mood and psychological deterioration.

The infamous 1999 Columbine High School massacre (Littleton, CO) by **Eric Harris** and **Dylan Klebold** brought this into focus, revealing backgrounds reportedly marked by family dysfunction alongside alienation and psychological distress. **Kip Kinkel's** 1998 shooting (Thurston High School, Springfield, OR), preceded by the murder of his parents, exposed family conflict, abuse, and unaddressed mental health issues. **Luka**

**Woodham's** 1997 shooting (Pearl High School, Pearl, MS) followed the killing of his mother, with reports citing family abuse and resentment.

More recent tragedies continue this pattern. **Adam Lanza** (Sandy Hook, 2012, Newtown, CT) lived in isolation with severe, unmanaged mental health issues after parents' divorce. **Nikolas Cruz** (Stoneman Douglas High School, 2018, Parkland, FL) had a history of instability and neglected mental health needs following the death of adoptive parents. **Salvador Ramos** (Robb Elementary, 2022, Uvalde, TX) experienced significant family conflict and isolation. **Ethan Crumbley's** parents (Oxford High School, 2021, Oxford, MI) were convicted for neglecting clear warning signs within dysfunctional context. **Dimitrios Pagourtzis** (Santa Fe High School, 2018, Santa Fe, TX) reportedly struggled with isolation and family neglect.

These violent acts become grotesque expressions of internal chaos and a failure of moral formation. They are stark reminders that intellectual or social giftedness offers no immunity from profound moral and psychological collapse when foundational character, often nurtured first within the family, is absent or eroded.

## **Entitlement and Violation: Sexual Assault Among the Privileged**

Another disturbing manifestation of internal disorder involves sexual harm. Cases of high-achieving young men facing sexual assault charges force uncomfortable questions about entitlement, consent, character formation, and the cultural environments that shape desire and behavior. How does a young man lauded for talent come to violate another person, disregarding their inherent dignity?

While peer pressure, team cultures, or substance use contribute, a deeper look often reveals patterns of permissive parenting that failed to instill clear moral boundaries, self-control, and respect for others. **A sense of entitlement**—fostered perhaps by athletic privilege, academic status, or socioeconomic background—can combine disastrously with a cultural landscape that often objectifies women and promotes a

debased view of sexuality, detached from relational commitment or moral responsibility. These are not merely "mistakes" but profound failures of character, reflecting a lack of respect for the inherent dignity of others often rooted in a deficient moral and relational upbringing.

The **Brock Turner** case (Stanford, 2015 assault) highlighted these issues, including privilege and permissive attitudes. Similar themes arise in other reported cases involving high-status young men like **Owen Labrie** (St. Paul's School) or **Jacob Anderson** (Baylor, 2016 plea). Addressing this requires more than superficial conservation workshops; it demands a recovery of robust moral education within families and communities, teaching young men the virtues of self-control, responsibility, and respect for the God-given dignity of every person.

## **The Role of the Church: Cultivating Character and Community**

Amidst these swirling crises, the Christian church possesses a unique calling and capacity to offer more than secular solutions, addressing the root causes by nurturing souls and shaping character within biblical truth and genuine community.

Recognizing these patterns demands a robust response:

1. **Championing Faithful Fatherhood & Family Stability:** The church must teach and support a Christian vision of family, equipping fathers for sacrificial love, spiritual diligence, and emotional presence. This includes practical support for marriages, resources for navigating conflict, and ministries aiding fathers while upholding paternal responsibility. **Crucially, where fathers are absent, older godly men must intentionally mentor boys, embodying faithful manhood and providing essential father figures.**
2. **Forging Authentic Male Community:** Young men need genuine community with other men committed to mutual growth in virtue and mature strength. Church should cultivate environments (mentoring programs with older men in the church)

(starting in high school), small groups with the men in the church, not just peer service projects side-by-side with older men in the church) for authentic relationships, where honesty about struggles is met with biblically grounded wisdom and accountability from **mature male role models, not only their peers**.

3. **Robust Teaching on Identity, Purpose, & Virtue:** Counter shifting cultural identities with clear teaching on being made in God's image, sin and redemption, Christian maturity, sexual ethics, human dignity, and life's purpose in Christ. This provides a framework to navigate pressures, grounding identity beyond fleeting achievements. This formation, **ideally initiated by fathers**, must be reinforced in the church.
4. **Cultivating Character Over Charisma:** Prioritize deep character formation in youth over mere entertainment and “fun.” Intentionally teach and model virtue like humility, self-control, compassion, courage, and integrity. Challenge distorted cultural masculinity and encourage young men, guiding them in applying Christian principles, led by older men in the church.
5. **Wise Engagement with Mental Health Struggles:** Compassionately acknowledge deep suffering within a framework of Christian truth and hope, rejecting therapeutic worldviews that validate the opposite of what God intends for men. Provide pastoral care, counseling, and wise referrals. Equip leaders, especially **father figures and mentors**, to recognize distress and respond with truth and love, protecting the vulnerable and taking accusations of harm seriously.

## Rebuilding Foundations: Cultivating Strength and Confidence in Young Men

Across these tragic outcomes – suicide, school shootings, sexual assault – the common thread often runs through the family and the surrounding culture's definition of flourishing. This is not to assign simplistic blame, as families themselves operate under immense pressures. But the reality, supported by decades of social science and centuries of wisdom, is that family structure, stability, and moral guidance matter

profoundly for adolescent development. Divorce, neglect, abuse, intense parental conflict, lack of meaningful paternal involvement (fatherlessness or poor fathering), parenting that veers between authoritarian disapproval and neglectful permissiveness – **these dynamics create environments where young men struggle to develop a secure identity, emotional regulation, moral reasoning, and healthy attachments. While deterministic – resilience is possible, and grace abounds – these familial wounds create significant vulnerabilities.** The high-performing young man may channel his insecurity into relentless achievement, but the underlying fragility remains, leaving him without true **self-confidence**.

Recognizing these patterns is not about excusing horrific behavior, but about understanding the complex soil in which such tragedies can grow. The alarming rise in suicide among young men (**a 57% increase for ages 15-24 between 2007-2022, per CDC data**) and the persistent problem of sexual assault demand more than reactive measures. They call for a deeper cultural and communal reckoning. We must question a definition of success that prizes performance above all else and instead cultivate **strength** of character, rooted in virtue and resilience. We must foster environments in homes, churches, schools, and communities – where young men can be honest about their struggles without shame, where vulnerability is acknowledged as part of the human condition (not weakness), and where identity and **confidence** are rooted in something more enduring than external validation – namely, in understanding their inherent worth and calling as persons made in God's image.

This requires rebuilding foundations. It means strengthening families, equipping parents—especially fathers—with the moral clarity and relational tools to raise sons of character, instilling both responsibility and genuine **self-assurance** grounded in truth. It involves revitalizing communities and churches as places of genuine belonging, mentorship, spiritual formation, and encouragement, where young men learn what it means to be **strong** through virtue, self-control, and service, not aggression or dominance. This includes promoting an understanding of masculinity where **power** is understood not as entitlement or control over others, but as the capacity for self-



mastery, protection of the vulnerable, and responsible stewardship exercised in service to God and neighbor. The path forward involves nurturing the souls of young men, guiding them toward a vision of flourishing grounded in truth, virtue, and covenant faithfulness. Building **true confidence** and **godly strength** in young men, founded on character and purpose, is essential not only to prevent these tragedies but to raise a generation capable of leading with integrity, meaning, and purpose. Only then might we begin to mend the shattered expectations and cultivate a culture that fosters genuine human flourishing.

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jesse porter jesse porter Apr 22

♥ Liked by Anthony B. Bradley

You make many important points about the crisis in young men in America today, and I hope you write a book about it. If you do, please consider focusing on the breakdown of family life as opposed to spending time on institutional solutions. It is largely because raising children has been shifted to institutions, schools, churches, governments, and "health" providers (psychology, sociology, the book industry), and away from the family that has generated much of the pathology, especially among young men, but also among young women. A family would never have developed the aberration of the LGBTQ+ industry.

Feminism and misandry are largely due to unhuman development of psychology and sociology, dispassionate studies of the human condition. Abandonment of the idea of our creation and speculation on what we "must have been" before writing was invented have resulted in flights of fancy replacing deep analysis of what we are, and have been, very likely even before written records, many of which are extant for our edification. Our natural tendency to believe ourselves

be improved versions of our ancestors is belied by availably records of ancient times. Life in a

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