

Young White Men: Scared, Entitled, and Cynical -- A Deadly Combination

By Paul Kivel

WE HAVE A VERY SERIOUS PROBLEM in this country. No, it's not welfare mothers, it's not recent immigrants, it's not African-American or Latino men, it's not Arab terrorists—it is young white men.

Nearly 70% of the devastating violence we experience in our communities is committed by white men and nearly 50% of that is committed by young white men between the ages of fifteen and thirty.¹ What kind of violence am I referring to? Take your pick. Domestic violence, rape, acquaintance rape, incest, male on male fights, serial killings, racist hate crimes, gay-bashing, arson, campus riots such as recently occurred at Michigan State University, and barroom brawls. Estimates are that 95% of all violence in our society is committed by males, and although women, men of color, and white men of all ages certainly can be violent, the overwhelming majority of acts of violence can be traced to young white men.

The violence of young white men maintains a society in which some older white men have most of the social, political, and economic power and benefits, and the majority of us have to fight for the left-overs. Twenty percent of the population of the United States controls over 90% of the net financial wealth.² Some young white men will become part of the top 20%, but most won't. The sorting out process—the process of deciding which young white men will make it into the top 20% is what produces the cynicism, fear, and sense of entitlement which leads to violence. In response to this process boys choose strategies which they think will help them thrive, survive, or at least stay alive.

Young white men see white men at the top of nearly every organization, court, government office, military position, university, and other powerful structures visible in our society. They are fed an unrelenting stream of history books, literature, TV shows, movies, video games, and advertisements which tell them that the place for white men is on top, in control, in power, in charge and that women, all people of color, people with disabilities, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, and recent immigrants are inferior, less worthy, and not entitled to the same power as white men. Many of their parents reinforce this by telling them that they are special, they are leaders, they can be anything they want, and that it is up to them to achieve and be successful. They often end up feeling entitled to special attention, to time devoted to

their interests, to resources put into their activities, and to money invested in their future. The messages of entitlement leads them to expect sex and caretaking from women, service and deference from people of color, and gratitude, sacrifice, and self-abasement from recent immigrants, from homosexuals, and from people with disabilities. They become angry and confused when their sense of entitlement is not responded to, when others are demanding access to what they do not want to share, and when their ability to get to the top is threatened.

Young white men know that white men should be on top, but they also know that this is a dog-eat-dog, competitive culture which only rewards a few. Men who get ahead are rewarded, regardless of what they did to succeed. What counts is winning, not how you played the game. They can clearly see in our political, economic, and even athletic leadership that lying, dishonesty, manipulation, racism, violence against and exploitation of women, and criminal activity are less important than coming out ahead. This knowledge leads young white men to become cynical. They see the success of greed and violence and they learn to put aside their own natural optimism and integrity and play the game. They also see the compromises in integrity and the sacrifices in dignity and self-respect that adult men around them have had to make to get ahead at work, in politics, in athletics, and in academics.

Young white men know that others are not necessarily going to play fair. They learn to bend the rules themselves, compromise what they think is right, and, of course, to watch their backs. At some point they realize that only a few will come out on top, and they begin to worry that they might not be one of them. On top of that, they are told that everyone who is not a white male is trying to get what white men are entitled to. Many end up being scared. Their fear can come to dominate their thinking. Their fear, combined with cynicism and a sense of entitlement, can lead to desperation and violence. Why violence?

From Christopher Columbus to George Bush II—we have over 500 years of history of white male violence. In fact, one of the aspects of American history that our school history books portray well is white men's inability to use anything other than violence to achieve their goals. Given a history full of praise of, or at least with minimal condemnation of genocide, slavery, exploitation, foreign invasions, wars, degradation of the natural environment, and sexual and physical assault within the family—it is not surprising that young white men would see violence as the primary way to solve problems. President Clinton, in responding to the massacre at Littleton, Colorado, said that we must teach children to solve their problems with words rather than guns. At that moment he was leading our engagement in not one, but two wars against other, much smaller countries, ruthlessly bombing Serbia, and engaging in aerial attacks and an embargo of food and medical supplies to Iraq leading to the death of tens of thousands of people, most of them children. Today we are at war in Iraq and in Afghanistan and are participating in or supporting military confrontations in several other countries. Meanwhile, here

in the United States, we continue to kill people who have killed people to demonstrate that killing people is wrong.

Entitlement, cynicism and fear coupled with a cultural history of white male violence lead young white men to sexually assault, beat up, or kill their girlfriends because they are not receiving the sex, deference, and services they feel they deserve. These feelings lead them to commit gay bashing and racist hate crimes because they believe that homosexuals and people of color are the cause of their problems. And they lead to relentless male-on-male competition, put-downs, fights and other forms of violence because every other white male is perceived to be in the way of one's success and a potential saboteur of one's efforts to succeed. Even the use of violence—the perception that one has the right to control others and force them to do what one wants—comes from a sense of white male entitlement.

This rather dismal portrait of the world is what getting ahead looks like to many white boys. They are told that this is a democracy, that there is a level playing field, and that those who work hardest and are most competent will succeed. But they also receive the message from our culture and the history they are taught that they can use whatever it takes, including violence, to get what they want because they are men, because they are white, and because they are American.

At some point, many come to realize that the odds are stacked against them. They are not being successful academically, or athletically, or socially, other boys are moving ahead, girls are succeeding, young people of color are accomplishing what they cannot. At that point, many young white men change strategies because trying to get ahead by the usual means doesn't seem to work.

Some just try to get by. They lower their goals and curb their ambitions and try to make it at school and in the neighborhood. They adjust, try to fit in, and remain unnoticed. They are the ones who always want to know what the rules are so that they can do what is required of them, but they will not take any risks. They cut themselves off emotionally from others and follow the rules, hoping that will pay off for them at some future time. Some just continue to quietly get by until well into adulthood.

But many become bitter, more cynical, and angry at a system which did not deliver on its promises to them. They cynically try to get over—to get away with behaviors which are illegal, immoral, or simply disruptive. Sometimes they try to get back. Their behavior is intentionally geared to cause trouble to those in authority, or to attack those they think received what they, as white men, were entitled to.

Getting over and getting back strategies lead to behaviors which can get young men in trouble. Most adults are just trying to keep the system going. Their attention is only on young men (and some young women) who are still trying to get ahead. They don't want to be bothered by those who they think are not trying hard enough. They tend to respond punitively to disruptive behavior, quick to exclude, expel, suspend, or write off those young men who are not cooperating.

Some young white men, when they see the system is not going to work for them, especially if they have gotten into trouble, will try to get out. Getting out strategies lead to dropping out of school, turning to heavy alcohol or other drug use, high risk activities, and suicide. We know by the large and increasing numbers of young white men who turn to these activities that they face a social and educational system which is only interested in seeing a few of them get ahead, condemning the rest to insecure economic status and anger and resentment at those who appear to have made it at their expense.

Getting ahead, getting by, getting over, getting back, getting even, getting out—we fail to teach young white men the one strategy that could actually make a difference in their lives and in our communities—getting together. In the face of injustice and unequal opportunity people have always gotten together. They formed unions, campaigns, demonstrations, clubs, support groups, organizations, parties, associations, and mass movements for social change. We inherit a long, rich history of getting together to achieve both individual betterment and community power. Just as white men have long held political and economic power in this country, other white men have been active participants in efforts by those without power to abolish slavery, gain the vote, establish community economic development, eliminate environmental degradation, eliminate all forms of violence, end militarism, and to build a democratic and just society.

We need to offer young white men another choice. A choice that says they can be part of our joint efforts to change a social system that does not work for most of us. A choice that says there is more to life than getting ahead or getting by, that they can live with more integrity than by getting over, or getting back, and that there is more hope than just getting out.

We need young white men to be active participants in our struggles for social justice. They bring vital energy, insight, creativity, passion, and caring to our efforts. But in order to embrace their participation we must see through their fear, their cynicism, and their sense of entitlement. We must look past their appearance, their attitudes, their behavior to their hearts, to the caring and responsible young people that they truly are. And, we must help them counter those qualities that most sabotage their efforts to work with us in a spirit of mutuality, trust, and respect. In other words, we must draw them in rather than pushing them out.

How do we counter fear, entitlement and cynicism? We have to start with their fear. If we deal with entitlement first their fear is only reinforced. They need safe places—groups, classrooms, and one-on-one discussions—where, with adult facilitation, they can explore their feelings, both their hopes and their fears. They need to learn how to express the fear, to hear the fears that others share, and to see how the fear has been constructed through segregation, stereotypes, scapegoating, and the creation of economic scarcity.

When their fears are expressed, acknowledged, shared, and understood we can begin to challenge their sense of entitlement. We can help them understand the distortions of history, science, politics, and culture, the false values, and the actual exploitation upon which that sense of entitlement is built. That can become a process through which we build a new sense of human entitlement to the fulfillment of basic human needs for food, shelter, respect, decent work, education, culture, and leisure for all people, including for white men.

Finally, we can counter cynicism by retelling our history of struggle by so many different people in so many different times and places for equality, full participation, and social justice. We can point to our achievements and note how far we have to go. We can recount the stories of white men who have been active participants in those struggles. And we can bring the story up to date with information about the vast number of community struggles currently being waged and the various ways people are organizing for change. As we do this we are really extending an invitation to young white men. We are inviting them to join us in our efforts to transform a system which provides all of us with such limited and unacceptable options.

There is no better way to overcome the fear, cynicism and sense of entitlement among young white men than to invite them to stand on the front lines with us in our efforts to achieve social justice. Our struggle is a long and glorious one and we need everyone to contribute. We cannot hope to stop the violence that young white men perpetrate without giving them better choices than they presently have. The choice to get together—to become participants—to play a meaningful role in our struggle—is the one choice that will benefit all of us and restore the sense of connection, purpose, and moral integrity that young white men need and that we so desperately need from them.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com.

1 Department of Justice statistics for 2000 which can be found at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/cfjs9901.pdf>.

2 Figure is from 1998 from "Recent Trends in Wealth Ownership, 1983-1998" by Edward N. Wolff, Jerome Levy Economics Institute, Working Paper #300, April, 2000 available at www.levy.org/docs/wrkpap/papers/300.html