



## Too Sedated to Commit Violent Crime?

### The Potential Effects of Young Male Isolation on Police Operations

[Matt Dolan, J.D.](#)

[Richard R. Johnson, Ph.D.](#)

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In our last article, [Is Violent Crime ACTUALLY Coming Down in 2025?](#), we addressed plausible explanations for why several jurisdictions in the U.S. have reported declines in violent crime over the last two to three years. These news stories tout the declines in violent crime (but not necessarily other types of crimes) in large and small cities from coast to coast.<sup>1</sup> While many mayors have credited their local public safety initiatives for these declines, we offered several potential explanations that seem to be more plausible, including the impact, in an aging U.S. population, of the decrease in the number of young men in the population on violent crime rates.

The declining U.S. birth rate, which has plummeted below the replacement level (enough births to “replace” the two parents) since 2008, means we are likely entering an era with an ever-smaller population of people in the age category most prone to engage in violent crime. The people *not* born in 2008 would be turning 17 years old in 2025. **Fewer and fewer teens and twenty-somethings in the population means fewer and fewer persons most statistically likely to be potential perpetrators or victims of violent crime.**

However, there is another important and historic demographic shift that has occurred in the last few years that might also be contributing to the decline in violent crime—the unprecedented disengagement of millions of young men from society, or what has been described as the *male sedation hypothesis*.<sup>2</sup> The male sedation hypothesis suggests that modern society passively sedates young men through comfort, distraction, and low expectations. This phenomenon is perhaps most clearly seen in the millions of working age men who are neither employed nor pursuing educational attainment—at levels unseen since at least the tail end of the Great Depression.<sup>3</sup> As we will explain, **this new social phenomenon may reduce the likelihood of young men engaging in violent behavior, contributing to new problems that will require law enforcement involvement, and re-shaping how we traditionally think of crime and disorder in our communities.**

### **Young Men and Risky Behavior**

For many decades, the fields of criminology and social psychology have confirmed what cultures throughout history have recognized: that adolescent and early-adulthood men are the segment of the population most engaged in risky behaviors. Sometimes these risky behaviors are socially discouraged, such as substance abuse, violence, property crime, sexual promiscuity, and reckless driving. This is why **most criminal offenders are males between the ages of 13 and 40**. Other risky behaviors have traditionally been *encouraged* by society, such as risky and physically demanding sports, military service, hazardous occupations (including the law enforcement occupation), and physically defending one's family and friends.<sup>4</sup>

Social psychologists and sociologists have argued that risky male behavior is driven by conscious and unconscious desires to achieve higher status within one's society and among one's peers. In a stable society, properly sanctioned risky behavior is rewarded with money, status, or admiration.<sup>5</sup> Oil rig workers without any education beyond high school, for example, have a more dangerous job than most, and are therefore paid more money than those employed in restaurants or hospitality with similar educational attainment. Combat veterans are widely admired for their contributions to American life, which entailed uniquely dangerous endeavors. Law enforcement officers and

firefighters who are injured in the line of duty are generally the subjects of public outpourings of support and admiration.

Education and entrepreneurship are also socially approved risky paths to social status. Attending college requires foregoing other activities in life as one devotes large amounts of time and money to earning a college degree, with the hope that this education will pay off in social status and income. The harder and longer the educational route—such as pursuing a doctorate in medicine or engineering—the less likely the student is to successfully complete the education *and* the greater the likely payoff in income and social status in the end, if successful. The same is true for entrepreneurship. Starting a business is extremely risky, and most businesses fail after just a few years. But most of society celebrates people who become successful business owners, and the monetary benefits are obvious.<sup>6</sup>

In unstable societies—such as neighborhoods plagued by unemployment, poverty, crime, substance abuse, and failing schools—both legitimate and illegitimate ways exist for young men to earn status. Many young men have historically turned to military service in order to earn status, respect, and the income that comes with it as a way out of such neighborhoods.

Others, however, have historically turned to deviant ways to earn status, such as selling drugs, committing other crimes to earn money, or using violence to earn the fear and respect of others in their communities. It is these deviant routes to gaining and maintaining status in disadvantaged neighborhoods that drives much of the crime—especially violent crime—in these neighborhoods. It explains why one young man is willing to seriously harm another man for what would appear to be a minor insult. For those with limited means to gain higher social status, the minor insult is a serious matter.<sup>7</sup>

Social scientists believe young men innately pursue social status to attract the best opportunities to find a mate, and to provide safety and security for themselves and the family they hope to have with this mate.<sup>8</sup> However, several social psychologists have recently noted changes in this drive for social status among young men in the U.S. and many other Western nations. These social scientists argue that **recent technological and social changes—leading to rampant use of pornography, online gaming, and the use of prescription drugs, alcohol, and marijuana—**

have sedated the biological and social drive to achieve social status among many young men.

### **The Male Sedation Hypothesis**

The term *male sedation hypothesis* was coined by social psychologists William Costello and David Buss.<sup>9</sup> This hypothesis suggests that **modern technology, particularly constant engagement with social media, pornography, and video games, is pacifying young men by providing a sense of fulfillment and reducing their drive for real-world social interactions. Costello and Buss argue that online virtual worlds offer simulated experiences that can mimic real-life social and sexual experiences, reducing the motivational drive for real-world experiences.**

Young men who always have their phones with them are constantly bombarded with entertainment through social media platforms, especially TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Research has revealed that these platforms, and their constant stream of new content, can be addictive. These platforms can trigger the release of dopamine, a hormone that plays a crucial role in the brain's reward system, motivation, and motor control. Dopamine is released when we experience pleasure or anticipate a reward, reinforcing the behaviors that led to that feeling. In fact, when people who are highly involved with social media experience periods without access to social media, they can experience physical symptoms of withdrawal. Phones and social media also tend to distract individuals from their real-life commitments, such as school, work, and family, leading to problems in these areas as well.<sup>10</sup>

Through first-person roleplay video games, young men can engage in (and excel at) virtual versions of masculine risky behaviors without the actual risk of injury, death, or arrest. Through online player communities, young men can socially connect with peers and build friendship bonds with like-minded young men from across the nation and the world. Research has revealed that these virtual games can trigger dopamine, and the realism of these games can often produce an adrenaline release, causing the games to satisfy some of the young men's biological drives toward risky behavior. These games meet the needs of many young men to experience excitement, competition, social status, and like-minded friendship groups. As a result, **young men immersed**

**in these virtual worlds are less likely to pursue risky and challenging experiences in real life.<sup>11</sup>**

Another factor at work in the male sedation hypothesis is the accessibility of online pornography—from viewing photos and videos of sexual content to real-time online connections through live sex chat or OnlyFans. For many young men, especially those who might be less successful in the real dating world, these virtual experiences seem to fulfill their sexual desires without having to put in the effort to earn social status to attract a mate. They offer a form of sexual gratification without having to navigate the complicated human aspects of cultivating a romantic relationship. As a result, these young men are becoming less interested in pursuing relationships, especially long-term relationships, marriage, and fathering in the real world.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, social media apps and online communities provide young men with substitutes for real-world aspects of masculinity. The virtual world provides young men with opportunities to experience risky behavior, adrenaline-producing excitement, friendship with like-minded peers, social status, and sex, all from the safety of one's bedroom. By providing a minimum level of distraction and fulfillment, these virtual experiences reduce the drive of young men to pursue real-world goals related to social status and dating. Many young men appear to become less motivated to pursue formal education, careers, friends in their own communities, and romantic relationships that will lead to marriage and families.<sup>13</sup>

These conditions are exacerbated further by a lowering of social expectations for young men and a rise in substance use. Since the Great Recession of 2008, there has been a surge in parents and grandparents willing to provide their adult offspring with housing, food, and spending money well into their thirties and beyond. Males now make up a minority of college students in the U.S., and the percentage of working-age men who are unemployed, partially employed, or on disability status has skyrocketed. The marriage rate has been in steep decline since 2008, and so has the birth rate.

**In other words, each year, a greater proportion of young American men are not in the workforce, not pursuing higher education, not pursuing relationships, and not raising families. It seems to many who have studied these phenomena that men are receiving *just enough* entertainment, fulfillment, and economic sustainment from online experiences, the**

**support of their families, and the social welfare safety net to avoid traditional pursuits—whether those pursuits are beneficial or detrimental to society.** When faced with the choice between this safe and comfortable existence, or the hard work and risks of pursuing social status in the real world, many young men are choosing the more comfortable path.<sup>14</sup>

Much research has revealed that increased access to recreational and prescription drugs is also helping keep young men blissfully sedated. Young men who spend large amounts of time online, are unemployed or only employed part-time, and have few relationships with others, are at elevated risk for severe depression. When the depressing reality sinks in with these young men that they are wasting their lives and have accomplished little in the real world, many turn to alcohol and drugs to self-medicate. When that no longer proves effective, a growing number are turning to suicide.<sup>15</sup>

### **What Does This Have to Do with the Police?**

While this is all extremely concerning for society in general, what does any of this have to do with the police? There are several ways we see this phenomenon impacting demand for police services.

**First, male sedation seems to be resulting in lower violent crime rates as more males are pursuing their risky and status-seeking behaviors in virtual environments, not on the streets.** More young men are stealing cars, racing cars, fighting, and firing weapons in first-person video games *rather* than on the real streets. Fewer young men are encountering each other in real life interactions, especially at social gatherings where they are likely to challenge or insult one another and end up in a physical altercation. And fewer young men are expending energy competing for the attention of women and, as a result, challenging each other. The research has revealed that males immersed in the online world and disconnected from normal life exhibit less violence in the real world than do other males.<sup>16</sup>

**Second, compared to the non-sedated young male population of years past, today's sedated young male population has higher levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. They also have lower levels of life satisfaction. As a result, these young men are at an elevated risk for mental health crises, including suicide attempts and domestic disturbances.** Therefore, law

enforcement officers are likely to encounter more mental health crisis and suicide calls, involving these individuals in particular.

Third, the use of drugs and alcohol to self-medicate, combined with their depressive symptoms, will likely lead to an increase in drug-related crimes. Medicated young men will likely be increasingly involved in drug crimes, such as prescription drug fraud and the purchase of illegal drugs. **Their attempts at self-medication will lead to more calls involving drug overdoses, as many in law enforcement have seen over the last ten or more years.**

Fourth, as sedated men are often dependent upon their families or the social welfare system for their housing, income, and (most importantly) their internet access, changes in that support structure will lead to property crime. When a parent or grandparent is no longer able or willing to support the sedated man, he is faced with the choice of either returning to engagement with the real world or turning to easier but illegal methods of support. These men need credit to stay online and keep their utilities operating, are very experienced with technology and the virtual world, and are less likely to be physically aggressive, so pursuing cash or merchandise from street thefts and burglaries is unlikely. **They are more likely to engage in internet and phone scams to illegally access bank accounts and credit cards. Therefore, law enforcement officers will likely continue to see an increase in cybercrimes and phone scams, especially those targeting the elderly.**

Fifth, the sedated men problem will lead to more disturbance calls. Living dependent on one's parents or grandparents will likely strain these relationships, especially as the elderly caregiver becomes less able or willing to support their adult offspring. **These situations will likely lead to an increase in family disputes involving situations other than intimate-partner violence.** For those who are dependent on the social welfare safety net, as states and the federal government tighten rules regarding the receiving and use of services such as unemployment income benefits, Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, also called EBT), law enforcement can expect to see more evictions and landlord-tenant disputes, particularly involving these sedated men.

**In the wake of eviction or family expulsion from the home, and in combination with the substance dependency and mental health issues discussed above, the sedated male population**

**is likely to continually add to the problem of homelessness in America and all of the crime and disorder challenges that come with it.**

## **Conclusion**

The societal impact of millions of sedated young men is not yet fully known, but one would be hard-pressed to imagine that any of the impacts will be positive. Families, neighborhoods, communities, and cities need young men who are engaged in family and civic life. Their absence is felt, particularly in impoverished communities, in ways that are difficult to accurately measure.

What we *can* measure is the statistical reality of their disengagement and the manner in which it is changing how we understand crime and disorder that is traditionally caused by young men. The increasing prevalence of sedated men in the young male population paired with the shrinking numbers of young men relative to the general population, means that law enforcement leaders should be preparing their officers and their citizens for a criminal landscape in the years ahead that looks very different from the past. **If these trends continue, community calls to the police will be *less* frequently concerning violent street crime as we have come to understand it, involving young men, gangs, drugs, and illegally obtained firearms, and *more* frequently concerning mental health crises, barricaded subjects, and domestic disturbances involving young men and their older relatives.**

**What appears to be a downturn in homicides and other violent crimes in cities across the country may prove to be the beginning of a new paradigm in addressing crime and disorder in light of a new demographic reality—millions of isolated, disengaged, and sedated young men.**



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