In Mass., men and boys falling behind, report shows

By Esmy Jimenez, Globe Staff

In many ways, the boys and men of Massachusetts are falling behind.

By fourth grade, boys are trailing girls in reading, a gap that widens by the eighth grade, despite the state being a national leader in education.

Their life expectancy is worse, too: While women in the state can expect to live to 83, men typically live to 78, and that discrepancy only gets worse for Black and Latino men.

And while gender pay gaps persist, men without a college degree have seen their wages stagnate, limiting their economic mobility.

The staggering data are highlighted in a recent report from Boston Indicators and the American Institute for Boys and Men released earlier this month that compiled comprehensive data across race, class, and gender to get a unique look at the state of boys and men in the Commonwealth.

“I’m concerned that in recent years as some of these data points have gotten more and more troubling, people in blue states like Mass. have have been too cautious to engage in the discussion,” said Luc Schuster, one of the authors of the report and the executive director of Boston Indicators, the research arm of the Boston Foundation.

“Men are half the population, and if we don’t engage in these issues in a thoughtful way, other more reactionary voices will step in and dominate discussion,” he added.

While the authors of the report are quick to point out that the wage gap for women very much still exists and men continue to be overrepresented in many leadership roles, the plight of boys and men they argue, ultimately ripples out to all parts of a community.

Take education for instance. Across the state, male high school students perform worse academically than female students: They’re completing fewer advanced courses, graduating at lower rates, and are less likely to enroll in college.

Employment without a bachelor’s degree has become more challenging over the years, too, the report finds. In 1983, 87 percent of men between the ages of 25 and 54 were employed. That number fell to 78 percent in 2023.

Why they’re not employed is also distinct. Among women, 49 percent say they are taking care of their family or home. Compare that with unemployed men, 48 percent of whom state they are ill or disabled.

Men of color are especially impacted. In the state, white men's full-time median earnings in 2023 were at $1,659 a week. Black men's earnings however dropped to $1,098, and Latino men's earnings were the lowest at $929.

Jobs that have traditionally been held by men such as manufacturing, retail, and wholesale trade, also saw declines in the last decade, while industries such as health care and education — ones typically associated with women — have grown.

"In the Boston area, our kind of bread and butter is health and education," said Branden Miles, the policy and research manager for the Mayor's Office of Black Male Advancement. The office, which was created in 2022 by Mayor Michelle Wu, is part of an effort to improve the educational, economic, and health outcomes of the city's Black men and boys.

Men "who may not have had the training or the ability to access higher education are struggling" to break into these fields, Miles said.

Part of the challenge for Black boys and men, he said, is battling stereotype threat, a psychological impact in which marginalized groups struggle to fight back against negative narratives about their identity, leading to stress and anxiety.

Black men and boys are sometimes seen as "challenging, a threat, or intimidating," he said, and that's why the office tries to approach their work with an asset-based approach, focusing on the talents of Black boys and men.

The ability for men to provide for themselves and their family has consequences, said Richard Reeves, one of the authors of the study and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

"You don't freeze the wages of particular group in society and not pay the price," he said.

Reeves also points to initiatives to get more women into science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, but fewer efforts to get men into fields such as health, education, administration, and literacy.

Workforce training and other targeted policies could address this gap to get more men into higher-paying fields such as nursing, that also face a national scarcity of workers.

Ultimately, the goal is to get "break out of zero-sum thinking" Reeves said, and "to show that it is possible to draw responsible attention from the boys and men without in any way taking away from the necessary ongoing effort on behalf of women and girls."

This story was produced by the Globe's Money, Power, Inequality team, which covers the racial wealth gap in Greater Boston. You can sign up for the newsletter here.

Esmy Jimenez can be reached at esmy.jimenez@globe.com. Follow her @esmyjimenez.