1 Introduction

As American millennials—adults born between 1981 and 1996—faced the second economic recession of their working lives in 2020, the *Washington Post* dubbed them “the unluckiest generation.” Members of this cohort were ages 11 to 28 during the Great Recession of 2007–9 and 24 to 39 when the pandemic-induced recession began. As a result of this one-two punch, millennials have higher unemployment rates, less accumulated wealth, and unprecedented levels of student debt, so they are more vulnerable to economic instability than members of prior generations at the same age. The Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality describes them as “canaries in the coalmine,” important in their own right but also because their experiences signal the changing configuration of the labor market.

For Black men growing up in poverty, the future that others had predicted was even bleaker. In the mid-1990s these millennial boys were characterized as future “superpredators,” a vicious breed of criminals. In a screed published in the archconservative *Weekly Standard*, political scientist John Dilulio contended that within a decade young Black men would trigger a massive spike in violent crime in the United States. Even though crime was declining by the time this narrative took hold, the threatening specter of superpredators spurred a host of “get tough” legal reforms that
contributed to a massive rise in incarceration, the militarization of the police, and the introduction of police into schools, all of which targeted communities of color. When I reference the term superpredator throughout this text, I am using it as shorthand to refer to twenty-five years of regressive policies that were justified on the basis of a racist moral panic.

*On Shifting Ground* examines the process of becoming a man in a place and time that is defined by an expanding criminal legal apparatus and contracting economic opportunities. Drawing on forty-five in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of millennial men without a college education, I analyze the key tensions that organize their lives: hypervisibility to the police and feared invisibility to others; isolation and individualism versus connectedness and generativity; stability versus “drama”; stagnation versus progress; hope versus fear; and stigma and shame versus positive, masculine affirmation. Risk permeates every aspect of their lives, flowing from their precarious position in relation to the labor market and criminal legal system (CLS) and spilling over into their strategies for making ends meet, forming supportive social ties and avoiding dangerous ones, constructing a positive sense of self, engaging in civic activity, and navigating public space. In an unfamiliar and shifting cultural landscape of adult masculinity, these men strive to define themselves in terms of what they can accomplish in the face of negative labels, seeking to avoid “being a statistic.” The title reflects the fact that these two structural shifts have created unstable and unpredictable terrain for men to navigate as they work to see themselves and be seen by others as men. With well-worn pathways to adulthood no longer passable, they must improvise paths for themselves despite their particular and multiple disadvantages.

The men whose stories are told in this book reside in a Philadelphia community organized around the supervision of persons returning from jails and prisons and from inpatient drug and alcohol treatment facilities. In Frankford, a racially diverse neighborhood in northeast Philadelphia, long-shuttered factories have been replaced by halfway houses, recovery and sober houses, and outpatient drug treatment clinics. This “high-reentry” community is distinguished by a constant churn of men in and out of confinement and whose homes are increasingly difficult to distinguish from carceral spaces. Many grew up with parents who were in the first wave of mass incarceration; some became caught up in it themselves, while others
remained in the community and struggled to avoid it. The CLS, starting with the police as gatekeepers, has crept into and altered nearly every other social institution. The carceral system and the postindustrial economy within which it has emerged shape pathways to adult manhood and the life chances of marginalized men. Moreover, they do not navigate these pathways alone. Their family members, romantic partners, friends, and members of their community offer them critical resources and at the same time set limits and expectations for them. The conclusions drawn in this book are relevant not only to men but also to the women who support them and who bear the brunt of their disconnection from mainstream institutions.

WHY MILLENNIALS?

Millennials, especially those who are economically and/or racially marginalized, occupy a uniquely vulnerable space in a changing landscape of contracting economic opportunities and an expanding criminal legal apparatus. These millennials, now aged 27 to 42, are far from “entitled,” as their predominantly White, upper-middle-class counterparts were caricatured before the pandemic. They occupy the bottom rung of a labor market bifurcated into high- and low-wage sectors. They are particularly susceptible to retractions of public assistance and other benefits previously provided by the government. Although college degrees are more common among millennials than in older generations, those without a college education are falling further behind than their counterparts in prior cohorts in terms of employment and income.

Millennials constitute the largest and fastest growing segment of those who are either employed or actively looking for a job. Even before the pandemic layoffs, 42 percent of them were freelancers in the growing “gig economy.” Those who drive for Uber or deliver food for GrubHub appreciate flexible scheduling but shoulder the risks of their jobs without liability protection or health or retirement benefits provided through their employers, who classify them as independent contractors rather than employees. Those who attend college face steep increases in the cost of tuition and graduate with an average of almost $39,000 in student loan debt. The default rates among the 19.8 million millennials who carry
educational debt spiked in 2011, as many sought refuge from the recession in for-profit colleges. This generation was the first to grow up during the steepest increase in rates of incarceration in the history of the United States. Many had parents and other family members who were imprisoned as a result of harsh drug policies aimed at inner-city communities of color. They live in neighborhoods that are simultaneously overpoliced and underpoliced, where calls for assistance are ignored or require long waits and where at least half of murders are never solved. Many of these inner-city communities are destabilized by losing and reabsorbing a disproportionate number of men, and to a lesser extent women, who are removed to and returned from jails and prisons.

The millennials who are the subject of this book navigated the crucial transitions of adolescence and young adulthood during a time of unprecedented expansion of the CLS. The “surveillant assemblage” includes new forms of formal legal supervision (e.g., GPS monitoring), but more importantly, it fuses the legal system with other social institutions such as education, public welfare, and the labor market. Millennials were the first generation to experience zero-tolerance disciplinary policies in their schools, leading to what is now known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” With rapidly expanding information-sharing capacity via the internet, their contacts with the CLS left behind a readily accessible and durable digital footprint. Criminal records are now regularly made public and used by employers, rental agents, and public welfare professionals for decision-making purposes. Mug shots or photos of turnstile jumping are posted on social media by police departments. Homeowners and business owners can now link their camera feeds to the police department, widening the space that is surveilled. Restaurant chains’ data on the location of a pizza delivery is shared with law enforcement agencies ready to serve a warrant.

In short, the CLS has become a defining social and economic institution for millennials, particularly those without college degrees, which reflects and reinforces their economic marginalization. As adults, the men in this book are attempting to disentangle themselves from this sticky web of social control; they strive to become “productive citizens” despite encountering substantial barriers erected by the CLS. They must also challenge the stigmatic labels applied by the system and internalized by others (and sometimes themselves), working to redeem themselves in the eyes of family members and potential romantic partners. These men—particularly
Black men—must navigate the conflicting needs to be invisible to avoid the police yet visible and recognizable as individuals to their loved ones. Interviews with the Frankford men demonstrate that the CLS affects every aspect of their lives, from their limited ability to use public space and create social ties with neighbors, peers, and family members to their very definitions of self. The system is a central part of their life histories: their stories of trauma, of which family members stood by them when they were incarcerated, of missing their children’s early milestones, of being disconnected from their schools. It teaches young people about their marginalized position in society, which puts them on the wrong side of the law. It circumscribes their definitions of adulthood: you are adult when you are treated as one by the system; of masculinity, as being able to control your own life and care for others; and of success: I’m not locked up. Their connection to the CLS is a master status and source of stigma they must overcome to develop a positive masculine identity. It restricts their plans for getting ahead educationally or economically by creating debt and imposing economic burdens on family members. It is always ready to drag them backward, requiring consistent efforts to simply remain in place.

So far, I have argued that the millennial generation is a worthwhile subject of study because of their vulnerable positions in relation to an increasingly insecure labor market and the growing power of the CLS. Some may question the utility of generational labels and point out that their cutoffs are arbitrary. To be sure, fifteen years covers much territory. My intention is not to reify these categories or insist that someone born in 1980 has a demonstrably different life trajectory than someone born in 1981. Nevertheless, cohorts are a useful heuristic device for understanding the effects of structural and cultural shifts on individuals’ lived experiences. Although this generation contains wide variations in circumstances, we know little about millennials without a college degree, who are more exposed to risk. This book focuses specifically on these men, both those who are White and those who are Black, Latino, or biracial.

Why Men?

As with millennials, the declining economic prospects of men have received a fair amount of popular attention. Indeed, a decade ago journalist
Hanna Rosin provocatively forecast “the end of men”—or, more precisely, of patriarchal power—as women surpassed men in their levels of education and stable employment and in their growing access to formerly male-dominated fields.¹⁹ Unsettled perceptions of men are reflected in condemnations of “toxic masculinity” on the one hand and of concern about “incels,” groups of involuntarily celibate men who are violently angry at being rejected by women. The #MeToo movement has created new accountability for men’s treatment of women in the workplace, with numerous high-profile celebrities and politicians forced out of their positions because of sexual harassment and assault. Predictable backlashes have also occurred, with groups defending men’s rights and a largely White male presence among active hate groups, such as those who marched in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 and those involved in the January 2021 insurrection at the Capitol.

Beneath the cultural dialogue around men and masculinity is a set of stark facts about men’s declining labor force participation. Even before the pandemic recession, men were significantly less likely to be employed or looking for work than in prior decades.²⁰ The number of less educated men of prime working age (25 to 54) has decreased by 10.7 percentage points since 1960, with a total loss of ten million men from the workforce.²¹ The Great Recession of 2007–9 had a disproportionate impact on traditionally male blue-collar industries. Many of these men never rejoined the workforce after what some called the “mancession,” leading to a surge in “deaths of despair,” or early death attributable to suicide, drug overdose, or alcoholic liver disease.²² Some men may never become or expect to become part of the formal labor force altogether.

Men are also falling behind in higher education, as anyone who attends or works at a university knows. The Atlantic noted in 2021 that “colleges have a guy problem,” pointing to the gender disparity in college enrollment (with a 6:4 ratio of women to men) and the steep decline in college enrollment in the last five years, 70 percent of which occurred among men.²³ Men are also significantly less likely than women to complete their education at every level. In the 2018–19 academic year, seventy-four men for every one hundred women graduated with a bachelor’s degree.²⁴ Women now make up the majority of graduates with associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. This disparity bodes ill for the future, since
economists and sociologists see a widening gap in opportunities for those with and without a college diploma.

The gendered, raced, and classed reconfiguration of higher education and the labor market has had spillover effects for marriage and living arrangements. Men are now more likely to be single (not married or cohabitating with a romantic partner) than women, and their declines in marriage and partnership are driven by their eroding economic positions. In a 2017 survey, 71 percent of Americans said that being able to support a family financially was very important for prospective male spouses or partners, while only 32 percent said that was true for prospective female spouses or partners. In short, unemployed men are perceived as less marriageable than their working counterparts and may face serious challenges when looking for a romantic partner. Most Black women (62%) and Black men (55%) are single, a figure that reflects both the poor employment prospects and the disproportionate incarceration of Black men. Single men with few economic prospects rely on family members to survive; one-third of unpartnered adult men live at home with their parents.

Men also garner the lion’s share of attention from agents of the CLS. Men’s vulnerability to arrest has increased since the advent of “proactive policing,” in which officers attempt to prevent crimes rather than respond to them after the fact. Even as crime has declined steadily since the mid-1990s, arrest has become a common feature of young adulthood. By the time they reach age 23, 38 percent of White men and 49 percent of Black men have been arrested. Astonishingly, arrest has become increasingly prevalent among young adults who self-report no criminal activity, a phenomenon known as the “great decoupling” of behavior and sanctions.

Men are also subject to greater risk of incarceration, especially men of color and men with low educational attainment. Among those born in 1965–69, 29 percent of Black men had experienced a spell of incarceration by age 30; the rates were even higher among Black men without a college diploma (30%) and those without a high school degree (60%). These staggering figures led sociologists Becky Pettit and Bruce Western to conclude that incarceration is a “new stage in the life course of young low-skill black men.” The effects of legal system contact are a primary driver of social inequality and precarity.
MEETING MEN IN FRANKFORD

Frankford, located in the inner northeast section of Philadelphia, was selected because it has a high rate of violent crime, is among the few racially diverse neighborhoods in this hypersegregated city, and absorbs a disproportionate number of people released from jail and prison into the community. Those characteristics make Frankford the ideal place to explore the convergence of disappearing economic prospects and heightened exposure to the CLS. Table 1 contains neighborhood descriptors and is found in the appendix.

This study, carried out from 2014 to 2019, compares Black, Latino, and White men at two levels of education: high school dropouts who may have a general equivalency diploma (GED) and those with at least a high school diploma.\textsuperscript{32} The men who were interviewed included twenty-three who identified as Black, five who identified as Latino, and seventeen who identified as White.\textsuperscript{33} We had great difficulty in enlisting Latino men, which is not surprising given the well-publicized immigration raids that occurred throughout this period. Of the forty-five men, twenty-six had at least a high school diploma. When comparing White men to men of color, there were no differences in their likelihood of having dropped out of high school, but White men were significantly more likely to have GEDs, while men of color were more likely to have earned high school diplomas. All but one of six men with some college, including those with associate of arts (AA; one) or bachelor of arts (BA; one) degrees, were men of color. This reflects a nonrandom sample of White men who disproportionately had criminal histories and were in the community for substance use recovery. All participants had resided in Frankford for at least a year, and many had lived there their whole lives. Table 2, which describes each participant, is found in the appendix.

We recruited men by advertising in the local newsletter and making announcements at community meetings, posting flyers at corner stores and barber shops, and approaching men in public. The staff of churches and community agencies, landlords, and local residents connected us with men we might interview. But we found that very few of the men who had already been interviewed could connect us with other men in the community. In fact, this was the first clue that withdrawal from social networks was prevalent among men in Frankford.
When the in-depth interviews were conducted, these men were between the ages of 23 and 39. We met in a private room in a church with a central location. Most recorded interviews lasted between two and four hours. We wrote down additional details, such as the men’s demeanor and mannerisms. Interview questions ranged widely: we asked about their daily routines, perceptions of the neighborhood, contact with the police and other agents of the legal system, family and social ties, and strategies for making ends meet (including drug sales) and included questions centering on identity, stigma, masculinity, and adulthood. Turning to their life histories, we asked about their families, romantic relationships, work, schooling, and criminal activity. To understand Frankford, we regularly attended community meetings, events, and venues from 2014 to 2019.34

My research team and I employed empathic interviewing, which helped many men feel more comfortable sharing intimate details of their often-traumatic lives. Some cried during their interviews, and many said that having someone listen to their stories made them feel better. We spoke with men who were vulnerable in multiple ways, subject to homelessness, food insecurity, addiction, victims of violence, formerly incarcerated, locked out of the labor market, and failing to meet their own definition of “a real man.” It was heavy work to hear their stories, attempt to represent them in ways that capture the complexity of their situations, and imagine policies and practices that could meaningfully improve their lives.

To protect the privacy of everyone we spoke with, I use pseudonyms for the men and women who are represented here and refer to community leaders by their titles. Before introducing the interpretive perspectives underlying this book’s analysis and the chapter outline, I examine the financial situations of the men we interviewed.

ECONOMIC PRECARITY

The Frankford men faced multiple barriers to steady employment at a living wage, including a lack of educational credentials, felony records, and spotty work histories. Some had visible signs of stigma, such as tattoos on the face or neck; had tics that revealed mental illness, brain injury, or disabilities; or lacked clean clothing because they were homeless. All these men were vulnerable; most of them lived precariously from day
to day. Trauma, physical and intellectual disabilities, addiction, spells of incarceration, chronic health problems, histories of violent victimization, homelessness, and food insecurity were common.

Analysis of the Frankford men’s employment reveals that the traditional distinctions made by the federal government—employed, unemployed but actively looking for work, or not in the labor force—fail to describe the full range of work activities in which they were engaged and do not fit subjective perceptions of who was “employed.” For example, Wesley, a 26-year-old Black veteran, considered himself unemployed and engaged in online job searches nearly every day, even though he regularly contributed $600 per month to the household budget by doing odd jobs such as janitorial work and cleaning out houses. Most of the men used a variety of strategies to make ends meet, including support from family members and friends, legal and quasi-legal hustles, and receipt of various public assistance streams.35

Over half of these men (twenty-five of forty-five) were generating regular income through legal employment (broadly defined) at the time of our interview. Common forms of on-the-books work included jobs in construction and home repair, food service, health care, technology, and non-profit sectors. Off-the-books (OTB) work, which is not reported to the government and thus is neither taxed nor eligible for benefits such as the earned income tax credit (EITC), unemployment insurance, and workers’ compensation, is irregular, and those men who rely on it often do different kinds of informal work simultaneously. Among the Frankford men, day labor in the construction industry was most important, but they also repaired cars; did janitorial work or cleaned out houses; provided personal services such as help with computer problems, fitness training, haircuts, and tattoos; and engaged in creative endeavors such as silk screening or picture framing. Few men relied on drug sales or other illegal activities for income when we interviewed them, although many had done so during their teens and twenties.

Almost three-quarters of the men we interviewed (thirty-three) had unstable work histories, which can be attributed to a wide range of factors, including disability, felony records and spells of incarceration, substance abuse, and homelessness. All but one had less than a bachelor’s degree, which was part of the selection criteria for inclusion in the study,
and two-fifths (nineteen) had either dropped out of high school or completed a GED. When comparing employment status by race, ten of the seventeen White men were employed at the time of the interview, three of these in OTB jobs, and four had stable employment histories. Of the twenty-eight men of color, sixteen were employed, three in OTB jobs, and eight had stable employment histories. The prevalence of CLS involvement among the White men in the sample is the most likely explanation for the lack of a racial gap in employment, which we might expect would be wider because of systemic racism and felony penalties in hiring.

Although minimum wage retail or food service jobs were common early in the Frankford men’s employment trajectories, some, particularly those who were White, started working alongside their parents in the construction or restaurant industries as teenagers. Their early and sponsored introduction to career-building fields gave them a durable competitive advantage into adulthood. They developed the skills and connections needed to get jobs without searching or interviewing, and often despite having criminal records. One-third of the White men (five of seventeen) had family members who helped them get jobs in the construction or food industry at some point, whereas less than one in ten of men of color (three of twenty-eight) got such jobs through their relatives.

The most troublesome question in our interviews involved creating an itemized monthly budget of expenses and sources of income. For some men, seeing all their expenses in relation to their income was an anxiety-producing, even traumatic experience, for it revealed that their expenses exceeded their incomes, sometimes by a factor of two. Although their earnings from all forms of work varied widely, the crucial factor in making ends meet was their ability to share financial burdens with families, friends, or romantic partners or to receive support from local and federal assistance programs.

Housing was the men’s leading expenditure. Although one-fifth did not pay any rent, those who did spent an average of 30 percent of their total earnings on rent. This is at the top of the recommended housing to income ratio specified in federal guidelines. Anyone who pays over 30 percent is “cost burdened,” and those who pay more than half of their income on rent are “severely cost burdened.” Since the vast majority of the men in this sample were in the 25–34 age range in 2014–19, they experienced
the effects of the mortgage lending crisis, the Great Recession, and the ongoing housing crisis acutely. The housing stock in Frankford is old and deteriorating, and residents pay disproportionately high rents for substandard apartments.

What these men spent on food depended on who they lived with and how much food assistance they received under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the federal program colloquially known as “food stamps,” which now takes the form of debit cards. On average, food accounted for 18 percent of their total monthly expenditures. Many of the Frankford men got by because they shared food expenses with family members and were not custodial fathers. Other men lived in recovery houses where food was provided, sometimes in exchange for a portion of residents’ SNAP benefits. Food programs run by the faith community in Frankford alleviated some of the men’s hunger through hot meals or food banks. Still, a number of men we interviewed experienced food insecurity, sometimes skipping meals because they had no food, or didn’t know where their next meal was coming from.

Over two-fifths of the men reported making regular monthly contributions to family members. (Only two men reported paying child support, which is not included here.) Family financial obligations were a substantial weight on many of the men we interviewed. Those who were even modestly successful at earning money reported that their close relatives relied on them to stay afloat. Some considered moving away to reduce the impact of these obligations, which they had difficulty meeting without going broke themselves.

Just one-fifth of the Frankford men reported having assets or sources of wealth such as inheritances, which are important because they serve as a safety net against financial shocks and volatile earnings. Cars allowed men to escape Frankford’s “drama,” reducing the likelihood that they would find trouble with the police or peers. More importantly, they allowed men easy access to the suburbs, where jobs were more plentiful and paid more. The men often described cars as the embodiment of adulthood because they confer the freedom to come and go as one pleases and not have to depend on others for a ride or on the vagaries of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), Philadelphia’s expensive public transit system. A couple of men had inherited houses