



PROTHEAN INSTITUTE
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The Cage We Built

Why Comfort Is Breaking Us — and How to Stop It

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the late 1960s an American scientist, John Calhoun, built a paradise for mice. Unlimited food and water. No predators, no disease, a perfect climate. Everything a mouse could possibly need, handed to it for free. The colony did not flourish. It collapsed. The males stopped competing, courting, and defending territory; they ate, slept, groomed themselves to a shine, and did nothing else. The females stopped raising their young. Breeding ceased among animals in perfect physical health, and the population died out. Nothing had been taken from these mice except the need to do anything to get what they were given. That turned out to be the one thing they could not survive losing.

This brief argues that the same thing is happening to us. Human beings, like every other animal, are not built merely to have their needs met. They are built to meet them — to work, to compete, to protect, to provide, to raise children. Hand people the reward while removing the doing, and you do not get contentment. You get the slow disintegration Calhoun watched in his mice. The modern developed world does exactly this, on an enormous scale, and it quietly explains a cluster of problems our experts have struggled with: an epidemic of depression concentrated in the richest and safest places on Earth, a male suicide rate three to four times the female, and a political war between young men and young women that widens every year.

This is Paper 4 of 5 in the Prothean Civilisational Architecture series. The full whitepaper — with the studies, the data, and the predictions on which the argument can be tested or broken — is available at protheaninstitute.com.

1. The Mice That Had Everything — and Died Anyway

The lesson of Calhoun's experiment, repeated many times with the same result, is simple and uncomfortable. An animal does not need food so much as it needs to forage for food. It does not need safety so much as it needs to defend territory; it does not need offspring so much as it needs to pursue, win, and protect a mate. Take away the struggle and simply hand over the reward, and the animal loses not its resources but the whole structure of its own flourishing.

The mouse did not need food. It needed to forage for it. Remove the struggle and hand over the reward, and you take away the one thing the animal was built to do.

This is not a quirk of mice. It shows up wherever animals are kept in comfort. Zoo animals given unlimited food and total safety still develop what looks unmistakably like depression — pacing, self-harm, refusing to breed. And here is the telling part: keepers do not fix it by adding more food or more safety. They fix it by making the animal work again — hiding its food so it must be hunted, building enclosures it must navigate. Restore the doing, and the animal recovers, even though the outcome was never in question.

2. Men and Women Are Being Broken — in Opposite Ways

Men and women are born with different sets of these built-in drives — something every human society in recorded history has organised itself around, and which the science of the last fifty years has only confirmed. The female drives centre on family, caregiving, close relationships, and the home. The male drives centre on competition, proving competence, protection, and provision. Neither is a weakness. Each is simply how that sex was built to reach a flourishing life.

Modern culture has shut down both — but in opposite ways. Women have been suppressed by replacement: told that a career is the only real measure of worth, and that choosing family instead is wasted potential. The drive is not attacked; it is quietly stripped of all value. Men have been suppressed by condemnation: told the drives themselves — competing, leading, protecting — are "toxic." Not redirected. Declared defective at the source.

If these drives were merely taught, you could unteach them. You cannot. In the 1990s, forty million Tamagotchis — beeping plastic toys with no warmth and no real needs — sold mostly to young girls, who set night alarms to "feed" them and wept when the pixels "died." When Western Australian schools later handed teenage girls lifelike crying baby dolls to put them off pregnancy, it backfired: those girls went on to have *more* teen pregnancies than the girls given ordinary sex education. The caregiving drive does not need installing. It only needs switching on. And when a 2026 video game *Pragmata* cast players as the protector of a small, dependent child, men reported wanting children of their own — and were promptly called creepy for it.

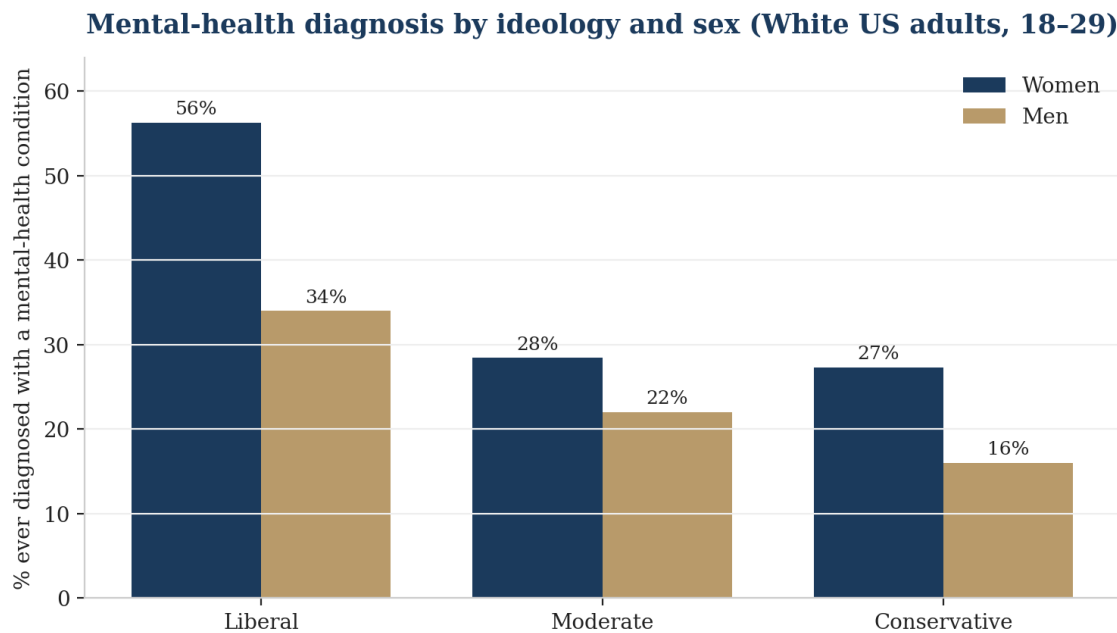
If these differences were just social pressure, the most equal societies would show the smallest gaps. They show the largest. Give men and women the most freedom to choose, and they choose more differently, not less. That is the fingerprint of nature, not conditioning.

3. Why the Richest, Safest, Freest Places Are the Most Depressed

Depression is not highest where life is hardest. It is highest where life is easiest. Across the world, the most developed, affluent, secure societies carry the most depression; the poorest and most precarious carry the least. Within wealthy countries, extra income past the point of comfort buys little added happiness and often more misery — a pattern economists have puzzled over for decades. Every theory that blames depression on hardship or inequality predicts the opposite of what we actually see. The cage explains it exactly: wealth is simply the most efficient method ever invented for handing people outcomes without the doing.

The damage shows up differently in each sex. Women's depression is diagnosed at far higher rates — and it peaks not among the most oppressed women but among the most liberated. Men's depression is largely invisible, because the tools that measure it were built around the way women express distress; men's comes out sideways — as anger, risk-taking, substance abuse, and withdrawal — and is counted only when it ends in a suicide rate three to four times the female one. The most damaged group barely registers at all: the growing population of

young men who have withdrawn from work, relationships, and purpose entirely — the real-world version of Calhoun's "beautiful ones."



Source: Goldberg analysis of Pew Research American Trends Panel, Wave 64 (2020).

Figure 1. Share who report ever being diagnosed with a mental-health condition, by politics and sex — white US adults aged 18–29. Liberal young women report roughly double the rate of their conservative peers. Source: Pew Research American Trends Panel (2020), Goldberg analysis.

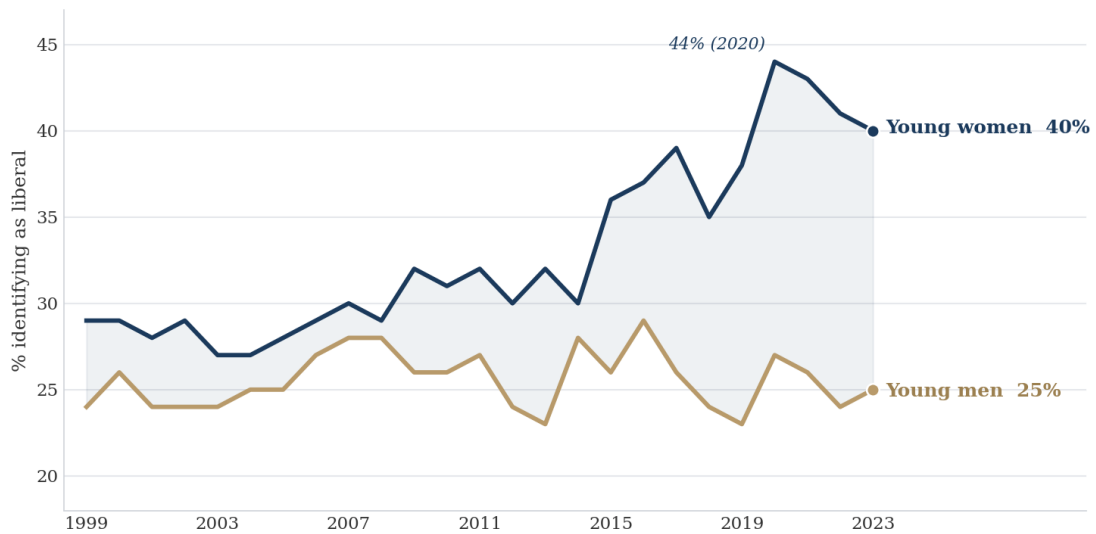
Depression tracks abundance, not scarcity. It rises with wealth, safety, and comfort. Which is to say: it tracks the cage.

4. The War Between Young Men and Women Is a Symptom

The political divide opening between young men and women is not really about politics. It is two wounded groups reaching for whatever will fill the hole. A young woman whose family drive has been switched off and devalued finds in progressive identity a ready-made replacement — a cause, a community, a sense of belonging, and surrogate dependents to protect in the form of the movement's chosen victims. A young man whose drives have been branded toxic reaches in the opposite direction — toward anything that tells him his instincts to compete, lead, and protect are legitimate rather than shameful.

This is why the gap is exploding. In the United States, the share of young women calling themselves liberal climbed from the high twenties to a peak of 44% by 2020, while young men stayed flat in the mid-twenties. The same split is opening right across the developed world. And it feeds on itself: each generation grows up copying the one before it, so each inherits and amplifies the previous generation's disorder.

Young US adults (18-29) identifying as liberal, by sex, 1999-2023



Source: Gallup Poll Social Series — annual surveys of 18–29-year-olds, 1999–2023 (annual series as charted by Axios Visuals, 2024). Values read from the published annual series; period means reproduce Gallup’s reported averages (women 28/32/40%, men 25/27/25%).

Figure 2. Young US adults (18–29) identifying as liberal, by sex, 1999–2023. The gap — negligible before about 2015 — has widened to roughly fifteen points. Source: Gallup, as charted by Axios Visuals (2024).

There is a particular cruelty here for men. Older societies ran on two levers — shame for letting people down, and honour for stepping up. Modern culture has rebuilt the shaming at enormous scale, and scrapped almost all of the honour. Worse, the protective instinct is now punished outright. A man who fights off an intruder, or steps in to stop a violent attacker, increasingly finds himself on trial. Across almost every Australian jurisdiction it is an offence to carry a knife or pepper spray, and self-defence is the single reason the law refuses to accept as legitimate. The old world honoured the protector. The new one prosecutes him — and disarms him before the fact.

The "toxic masculinity" story is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Brand a man's instincts as defective, leave him no honourable outlet, and you produce exactly the resentment you claimed to be preventing.

5. No, It Isn't the Phones

The easy explanation is the smartphone, and it is wrong — or half-right in a way that matters. Phones did not cause this; they are an accelerant. What the algorithm changes is *who young people copy*. Instead of the real adults around them, they now copy an endless, curated, outrage-optimised feed, soaking up the disorder faster and more completely than any village ever could. It also collapses something that used to take generations: the slow spread of elite decadence down through society. The feed now delivers the most damaged outlook of the most insulated people straight onto the screen of a teenager who has earned none of it.

Rome had no smartphones. Its elite reached the same dead end anyway. The phone makes the fall faster; it does not start it.

But the proof that the phone is not the cause sits in the history books. The late Roman elite, the Chinese gentry of the Tang and Song, the Abbasid court — each reached inherited comfort where status and security arrived without effort, and each fell into the same pattern: men withdrawing, families collapsing, a turn from inherited purpose toward novelty and aesthetics. No printing press, let alone an algorithm. Hold the technology at zero and the comfort high, and the same thing still happens.

6. You Cannot Medicate Your Way Out of a Cage

Our entire response to this crisis treats it as millions of separate chemical faults. Roughly one in six adults is now on antidepressants. Whatever those drugs do for any single person, the population-level fact is damning: prescriptions have risen relentlessly for thirty years, and depression has risen right alongside them. If the problem were simply broken brain chemistry, mass treatment would have bent the curve down. It has not.

The scale of the medication is the diagnosis. When a sixth of a population needs drugs to cope, the problem is not a sixth of the population. It is the world we have built around them.

The fix is the one that worked in the zoo: not more comfort, but the restoration of conditions that make effort necessary again. This does not mean making life harder, and it does not mean tearing down the real gains of modern life — medicine, the education of women, the safety net. It means we stop removing the things that give people something real to do. There is even a clean test sitting in plain sight: keep paying welfare, but attach a requirement of genuine, productive activity, and measure whether mental health improves while the money stays the same. If it does, the missing ingredient was never the money. It was the doing.

And the "toxic masculinity" narrative should be named for what it is — not a cultural preference to be managed with sensitivity training, but a structural cause of radicalisation and withdrawal carrying measurable, society-wide costs. It belongs in the diagnosis as a problem, and in policy as something to be corrected.

This Is Paper 4 of 5

The Cage We Built is the clinical paper of the Prothean Civilisational Architecture series — the one that traces the modern collapse in mental health to its structural root.

Paper 1 — Lost Coherence names what the ancient world could do that we no longer can, and why.

Paper 2 — Thus Spake Ilos examines the trust-transmission technology that religion once supplied and modernity has not replaced.

Paper 3 — The Threshold shows what removing the conditions of growing up is doing to an entire population.

Paper 5 — The Invisible Path sets out the policy programme this diagnosis demands.

The full whitepaper — with the studies, the data, and the predictions that could prove it wrong — is available at protheaninstitute.com. What you have just read is the argument. The whitepaper is the proof.

About Prothean Institute

The Prothean Institute is an independent research organisation dedicated to understanding the structural conditions of civilisational flourishing — and to preserving that understanding for those who come after. We publish policy briefs, whitepapers, and analytical commentary. We follow evidence to uncomfortable conclusions and say so clearly. We do not produce output calibrated for institutional acceptability, political safety, or the comfort of any particular audience.

The archive exists for those paying close enough attention to find it.