

THE SAM PROJECT

# EXPERIENCE OVER IDEOLOGY

How Young Men Judge Trust, Leadership, and  
Everyday Life



# INTRODUCTION

Young men are navigating historic levels of pressure — economic strain, uncertainty about identity, isolation, and a widening gap between their lived experience and what they hear from political leaders.

This report explores how those pressures are shaping the way young men make sense of trust, leadership, and whether things are working in their lives.

What follows shows how experience — not ideology — is increasingly guiding how young men judge fairness, credibility, and political leadership, and why that shift matters for the future of democratic life.

# ABOUT THIS STUDY

This analysis draws on one of the most comprehensive datasets available on young Americans today. Sponsored by The SAM Project (Speaking with American Men) and led by Harvard Kennedy School polling director John Della Volpe and the team at SocialSphere, Inc., the study surveyed 4,211 young adults ages 16–29, including a large, representative oversample of 3,460 young men.

The survey was conducted online from October 28 to November 6, 2025, with respondents from all regions, racial and ethnic backgrounds, education levels, and employment sectors. Post-stratification weights based on CPS and ACS benchmarks were applied, and estimates are reported with 95% credibility intervals (approximately  $\pm 1.5\%$  for the full sample,  $\pm 1.7\%$  for young men, and  $\pm 3.7\%$  for young women), reflecting model-based uncertainty.

The survey builds on 30 in-depth focus groups with young men conducted across 39 states between March and May 2025. Participants were recruited based on lived experience rather than political affiliation, and insights from these conversations directly informed the survey design.

Together, this mixed-methods approach allows us to capture both scale and depth — comparing young men and young women with precision while revealing how young men experience pressure, identity, and leadership in this moment.

# N=4,211

Including 3,460 young men  
between the ages of 16-and- 29.

# 30

Focus groups covering 39 states

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Trust among young men is built through visible competence, fair treatment, and leadership that demonstrates genuine understanding of the pressures shaping their lives.

In the wake of the 2024 election, many observers interpreted changes among young men as a political shift. Our findings point to a deeper and more personal reality. Young men are first reassessing identity, belonging, and their place in the world; political attitudes are following, not leading. While many continue to support Democratic-aligned policies, growing numbers feel disconnected from political leadership and unsure that anyone in power understands their lived experience. Three core dynamics define this moment:

1. **Identity & Belonging.** Many young men feel judged and uncertain where they belong. A shortage of positive role models and stable offline community anchors is pushing identity formation into gaming, creators, and online spaces — driven less by ideology than by a search for dignity and recognition.
2. **Economics & Legitimacy.** Economic pressure is acute and destabilizing. Many young men feel financially precarious and believe the system is tilted against them, yet remain open to restoring legitimacy if responses feel fair, urgent, and grounded in reality.
3. **Politics, Parties, & Power.** Young men do not believe either party is delivering. Democrats align more closely with their values but lose credibility on urgency and visible delivery; Republicans earn limited credit for projecting strength and order, without winning trust on shared values.

# HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

This report explains how young men are making sense of the world right now.

- **The findings describe lived experience.**  
The first sections focus on identity, economic pressure, and daily realities shaping how young men see themselves and their futures.
- **Political attitudes come later — and flow from experience.** When politics appears, it reflects how young men evaluate performance, fairness, and credibility, rather than fixed ideological positions.
- **Issues are presented as tests, not demands.** Cost of living, work, fairness, safety, and autonomy are shown as the standards young men use to judge whether leadership is working — not as policy checklists.
- **The five mindsets explain different responses to the same pressures.** Young men share many of the same challenges, but interpret and respond to them in distinct ways. The mindsets help explain why reactions diverge.
- **This is a diagnostic report.** It explains what is happening and why, not what should be done. Any responses begin with understanding how trust is formed or lost.

# **HOW YOUNG MEN EXPERIENCE THIS MOMENT**

# IDENTITY, BELONGING, & THE MALE EXPERIENCE

## **Finding 1:** Young men feel judged and uncertain about what society expects of them.

Young men describe navigating rapidly changing expectations of masculinity without clear guidance to match. Many feel pressure to perform roles they do not fully understand, leading to caution, self-monitoring, and emotional reserve — shaping how they show up in relationships, work, and public life. Expectations to provide and protect remain strong, even as the pathways to meeting those expectations feel increasingly unclear or out of reach.

**75%**

say men are judged for showing weakness.

**74%**

say men are expected to be providers and protectors.

**57%**

say they have held back opinions out of fear of negative reactions.

# IDENTITY, BELONGING, & THE MALE EXPERIENCE

## **Finding 2:** Emotional strain is widespread among young men, but it is often internalized.

High levels of stress, isolation, and low motivation are common among young men, yet these feelings are rarely expressed outwardly. Many feel expected to carry pressure quietly, which shapes how they cope, how they define strength, and how willing they are to seek support. This internalized strain influences not only mental health, but also how young men assess leadership, resilience, and whether political leaders and institutions understand what they are going through.

**84%**

report carrying a lot of stress or pressure.

**77%**

say they feel they're on their own without much support.

**77%**

say they don't feel excited or motivated.



# IDENTITY, BELONGING, & THE MALE EXPERIENCE

## **Finding 3:** Many young men lack stable offline belonging and visible role models.

Many young men report weak in-person community ties and a perceived absence of positive, relatable male role models. While their definitions of manhood emphasize responsibility, protection, and doing the right thing, many feel unsupported in meeting those expectations. As a result, identity formation and belonging increasingly shift to digital spaces, where connection is more accessible but often less grounding.

**62%**

say today's male role models are no better than previous generations.

**51%**

say they sometimes feel blamed, just for being a man.

**50%**

say men are being pushed aside in society.

**“WHAT A MAN SHOULD BE NOWADAYS...  
DOING THE RIGHT THING. FOOD IN THE  
FRIDGE, BILLS PAID — AND  
SOMEHOW YOU’RE STILL HOLDING  
PEOPLE BACK.”**

Hispanic man, 23, Las Vegas, NV

# **WHEN MATERIAL PRESSURE SHAPES TRUST**

# ECONOMIC REALITY & SYSTEM LEGITIMACY

## **Finding 4:** Economic instability defines young men's daily lives — even among those “getting by.”

Many young men describe their financial situation as fragile, even when they are able to cover basic expenses. Thin margins, rising costs, and limited buffers mean that a single unexpected expense can quickly turn stability into crisis. This persistent vulnerability shapes how young men experience adulthood and how they judge whether political institutions understand the pressures they face.

**38%**

say they are “getting by” but saving little.

**31%**

report having been homeless or near-homeless in the past five years.

**28%**

of employed young men report having more than one paying job.

# ECONOMIC REALITY & SYSTEM LEGITIMACY

## **Finding 5:** Young men want work that is respected, protected, and prepared for a changing economy.

Young men are less concerned with traditional credentials than with whether work pathways feel fair, respected, and viable in a rapidly changing economy. They place high value on skilled and practical labor, but are equally focused on whether the system is preparing workers for disruption — particularly from AI — and protecting those in insecure or platform-based jobs. When economic change feels unmanaged or one-sided, frustration deepens, not just about jobs, but about whether the system is working for people like them.

**76%**

say respect for trade jobs and practical work matters to them personally.

**69%**

say preparing workers for the future of AI while protecting jobs matters.

**68%**

say protecting gig workers from wage theft and unfair platforms is important.

# ECONOMIC REALITY & SYSTEM LEGITIMACY

## **Finding 6:** Affordability has become the primary test young men use to judge whether leadership is working.

For many young men, rising costs are not a background concern — they shape day-to-day survival. Decisions about housing, food, savings, and the future are made under constant financial pressure, leaving little margin for error. Affordability has become a direct measure of whether leaders understand real life. When basic costs feel out of control, trust erodes quickly, regardless of rhetoric or stated values. For many young men, affordability is no longer an economic issue — it's a measure of whether the system is paying attention at all.

**79%**

say rising costs for rent, food, gas, and basic needs matter personally to them.

**78%**

say affordable housing matters personally.

**56%**

say they are most stressed about paying for groceries or food.

**“ I FEEL LIKE I GREW UP WORKING CLASS OR POOR. SO NOW THAT I AM MAKING, LIKE, SIX FIGURES, I STILL KINDA FEEL POOR IN A CERTAIN WAY BECAUSE OF INFLATION. SO, FOR ME, NOT MUCH HAS CHANGED.”**

— Asian man, 28, Los Angeles, CA

# ECONOMIC REALITY & SYSTEM LEGITIMACY

## **Finding 7:** Young men believe the system is unfair — but many still think it can work.

Many young men believe the economic and political system is tilted in favor of the wealthy and well-connected, reinforcing a sense that the rules are not applied evenly. At the same time, this frustration has not hardened into full rejection. Instead, many distinguish between disappointment with how the system operates today and the possibility that it could function more fairly under different conditions. This tension — skepticism paired with conditional hope — explains why frustration often turns into watchfulness rather than withdrawal.

**73%**

say they want to believe there is a better future.

**72%**

say the system benefits the wealthy and connected.

**51%**

say the system can be fixed rather than replaced (31%).



**PARTY VIEWS EMERGE FROM  
PRESSURE, NOT IDEOLOGY**

# POLITICS, PARTIES & POWER

## **Finding 8:** Few young men believe any political actor is delivering for them.

Across evaluations of Democrats, Republicans, and national leadership more broadly, young men express broad dissatisfaction with political performance. Fewer than one in three believe any major political actor is delivering for them. This gap is not about partisan preference, but about whether leaders are producing visible results that match everyday pressures. The result is not ideological opposition, but disengagement driven by perceived non-performance.

**65%**

say both parties are more interested in protecting power than helping them.

**27%**

say Trump is delivering for them; 25% say Republicans are delivering.

**18%**

say Democrats are delivering; 30% say Democrats care about them.

# POLITICS, PARTIES & POWER

## **Finding 9:** For young men, representation is judged through respect, autonomy, and recognition of effort.

Young men evaluate political representation less through empathy or rhetoric than through whether leaders signal respect for work, protect personal autonomy, and recognize effort. Across issues, they are looking for cues that responsibility and contribution still matter — and that leadership does not feel intrusive, moralizing, or disconnected from everyday realities. When those signals are absent, young men are less likely to see themselves reflected in political leadership, even when they may agree with stated values or policy goals.

**76%**

say respect for work and contribution matters personally.

**68%**

say privacy and freedom matter personally.

**ONLY 50%**

say they feel they are living up to the expectations they set for themselves

**“THE REPUBLICAN DOESN'T WANNA  
TALK TO ME... THE DEMOCRAT  
JUST ACTS LIKE HE'S LISTENING.”**

— Black man, 29, Pottstown, PA

# POLITICS, PARTIES & POWER

**Finding 10:** Republicans earn conditional credit from young men on performance and order — not shared values.

Young men are more open to Republicans on issues tied to economic performance, safety, and order, but this openness is pragmatic rather than ideological. Support reflects assessments of strength and effectiveness, not a sense of cultural or value alignment. Even where Republicans receive higher marks, skepticism remains about whether they genuinely understand or care about people like them.

**+5**

Young men give Republicans a 5-point edge on the economy.

**+13**

Young men give Republicans a 13-point edge on crypto.

**+14**

Young men give Republicans a 14-point edge on crime.

# **HOW YOUNG MEN DECIDE WHETHER THINGS ARE WORKING**

# HOW YOUNG MEN DECIDE WHO TO TRUST

Across issues, young men are less focused on ideology than on whether leadership feels competent, fair, and grounded in real life.

## Economic Security & Dignity

### Competence & Dignity

- 79% say rising costs matter personally
  - 76% say respect for work and contribution matters
- *Can I afford to live—and does my work still count?*

## Fairness & Rules

### Legitimacy

- 72% say the system favors the wealthy
  - 75% say corruption matters
- *Do rules apply equally?*

## Order & Stability

### Performance

- 78% say avoiding unnecessary wars matters
  - 36% say Republicans are better on crime (22% Democrats)
- *Can leaders maintain basic order?*

## Autonomy, Privacy & Control

### Respect

- 68% say digital privacy matters
  - 33% of young men have invested in crypto
- *Do leaders respect personal control -- or overreach?*

**“THERE'S AN AGENDA ON BOTH SIDES,  
AND IT DOESN'T INCLUDE YOU.”**

— Black man, 24, Birmingham, AL



**YOUNG MEN RESPOND TO THE SAME  
PRESSURES IN DIFFERENT WAYS**

# THE FIVE MINDSETS SHAPING YOUNG MEN TODAY

Young men are sorting into five identity-driven mindsets shaped by pressure, trust, and expectations of leadership. Political attitudes follow from these lived experiences.

Across these findings, young men are not retreating into rigid ideology or partisan identity. Instead, many are positioning themselves at a distance — skeptical, autonomy-focused, and watchful rather than disengaged.

Mindset	Share	Core Orientation
Idealists	19%	Left-leaning, values-driven, delivery-focused; believe systems can be fair and effective when led competently
Disillusioned	14%	Left-leaning, deeply institution-skeptical; share fairness ideals but doubt institutions will deliver
Skeptical Center	23%	Non-ideological, autonomy- and performance-first; judge leadership by outcomes, not intentions
Resentful Strivers	29%	Right-leaning, fairness- and effort-focused; feel effort is undervalued and rules favor others
Order Seekers	14%	Right-leaning, order- and rules-focused; prioritize stability, rules, and predictable enforcement

# CONCLUSION

Across race, education, and politics, young men are navigating a shared set of pressures that shape how they see themselves, their futures, and the world around them. Economic strain, uncertainty about identity, and the erosion of stable belonging are not abstract concerns. They are daily realities that influence how young men judge leadership, fairness, and whether things are working.

This report shows that political behavior among young men is downstream of lived experience. Trust is not withdrawn because of ideology alone, but because politics too often feels distant, inconsistent, or disconnected from real life. When trust feels thin, skepticism grows — not only toward parties, but toward systems that claim to speak for them.

The findings also make clear that young men are not a single story. They are sorting into distinct mindsets shaped by different expectations of responsibility, order, fairness, and power. These differences help explain why some disengage, why others drift right, and why many remain open but unconvinced — without reducing this moment to simple partisan narratives.

**Understanding young men today starts with listening to how they experience the world, not just how they vote. Experience — not ideology — is shaping how trust is earned, judgments are made, and engagement unfolds in this moment.**

**THANK YOU.**