The Adolescent Man Box

Jesuit Social Services
Building a Just Society

Fact Sheet 1
General overview

What is the Adolescent Man Box?

The Adolescent Man Box refers to a collection of rules that place pressure on boys to behave in certain ways. Using a validated scale - the Meanings of Adolescent Masculinity scale[1] - the Adolescent Man Box contains 27 rules that are grouped into four thematic pillars **(Emotional restriction, Constant effort to be manly, Social teasing** and **Heterosexism).**

We asked adolescents about societal pressure to comply with the rules (focused on the **Constant effort to be manly** pillar), and if they personally agreed with the rules across all four pillars.

Constant effort
Maintain tough, confident and strong persona

Emotional restriction
Emotionally stoic, reluctant to share feelings

Heterosexism
Opposition to homosexuality and femininity

Social teasing
Give and take teasing and taunting with peers

Why conduct this research?

While every child and young person in Australia deserves to grow up in a safe, supported, and connected environment that nurtures their ability to thrive, many face violence and harm, and some are involved in causing harm to others.

The Adolescent Man Box study was conducted to hear directly from adolescent boys about how much pressure they feel to conform to stereotypical masculine norms and to what extent their beliefs about masculinity are associated with behaviours such as the use of violence, bullying, aggression, risk taking or a reluctance to seek help.

The research builds on earlier Man Box studies which examined similar issues in relation to men aged 18 to 30 and subsequently 30 to 45[2]. Unlike the adult research, however, the Adolescent Man Box study also considers the perspectives of girls and non-binary adolescents. This recognises that societal pressures and attitudes about masculinity are shaped by all in the community, and provides valuable insights into perspectives across genders.

About the Adolescent Man Box study

The Adolescent Man Box study is the first of its kind in Australia. It offers a detailed look at how adolescents of all genders perceive and agree with stereotypical masculine norms. The study also reveals the prevalence of a range of behaviours and life outcomes – and highlights the health and social impacts of either supporting or rejecting rigid norms among adolescent boys. The study heard from 1401 young people aged 14-18 years and is representative of the Australian population by age and gender, and broadly representative of state/territory and metropolitan and regional areas.

1 Oransky and Fisher, 2009. The development and validation of the Meanings of Adolescent Masculinity Scale. Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 10: 57-72

2 The Men's Project. 2018. The Man Box: A study on being a young man in Australia, Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services.
The Men's Project & Flood, M. 2024. The Man Box 2024: Re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia. Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services.

Findings – social pressure and personal endorsement of masculine rules

The pressure to be manly remains strong in our society, even in adolescence. Societal pressures on teenage boys to be 'a real man' were equally observed by both boys and girls.

Between 60% and 63% of boys and girls believe that most people in Australia expect teenage boys to be manly, confident, and strong at all times. Almost half of boys (46%) and a greater number of girls (50%) indicated there was a social pressure on teenage boys to never back down from a challenge in public.

Figure 1: Proportion of adolescents who personally endorsed Adolescent Man Box rules, by gender (n=1401)

Percentage of 14-18 year old survey respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that 'In my opinion...'

Adolescent Man Box rules	Boys	Girls	Total*
Pillar 1: Constant effort to be manly			
A teenage boy should always seem as manly as other boys that he knows	37%	11%	25%
A teenage boy should never back down from a challenge in public	25%	10%	18%
Acting manly should be the most important goal for teenage boys	26%	8%	17%
A teenage boy must always appear confident even if he isn't	44%	15%	30%
No matter what happens, a teenage boy should seem strong to others	43%	13%	29%
Getting made fun of helps teenage boys become tough	32%	15%	24%
Teenage boys should try to appear manly in almost all situations	38%	14%	27%
Pillar 2: Emotional restriction			
It's weird for a teenage boy to talk about his feelings with other teenage boys	34%	14%	24%
When a teenage boy has a fear, he should keep it to himself	22%	5%	14%
It's hard to respect a teenage boy who shows his feelings	14%	5%	10%
If a teenage boy has hurt feelings he should hold it in	23%	5%	15%
It is not a teenage boy's job to comfort a friend who is upset	13%	6%	10%
It's not important for teenage boys to listen to each other's problems	7%	2%	4%
Teenage boys should not talk about their worries with each other	12%	2%	7%
Pillar 3: Heterosexism			
A teenage boy who wears nail polish is hard to take seriously	53%	24%	40%
It's embarrassing to have a lot of gay friends	33%	12%	23%
Being thought of as gay makes a teenage boy seem like less of a man	48%	26%	38%
It would be embarrassing for a teenage boy to say that he is interested in being a hairdresser	25%	12%	19%
A good way to seem manly is to not act gay	47%	30%	39%
A teenage boy should be embarrassed if someone says he "runs like a girl"	40%	16%	29%
There is something wrong if a teenage boy wants to do activities usually done by girls	27%	12%	20%
Teenage boys should never act like a girl	47%	24%	36%
Pillar 4: Social teasing			
A teenage boy should be able to take teasing from his friends, even if it's mean or degrading	33%	10%	22%
There's nothing wrong with a teenage boy who picks on his friends, even if they get upset	15%	6%	11%
It's normal for teenage boys to make fun of their friends	62%	54%	58%
In order to fit in, teenage boys must be able to tease other teenage boys	24%	13%	19%
Teenage boys do not pick on each other to be mean	54%	35%	45%

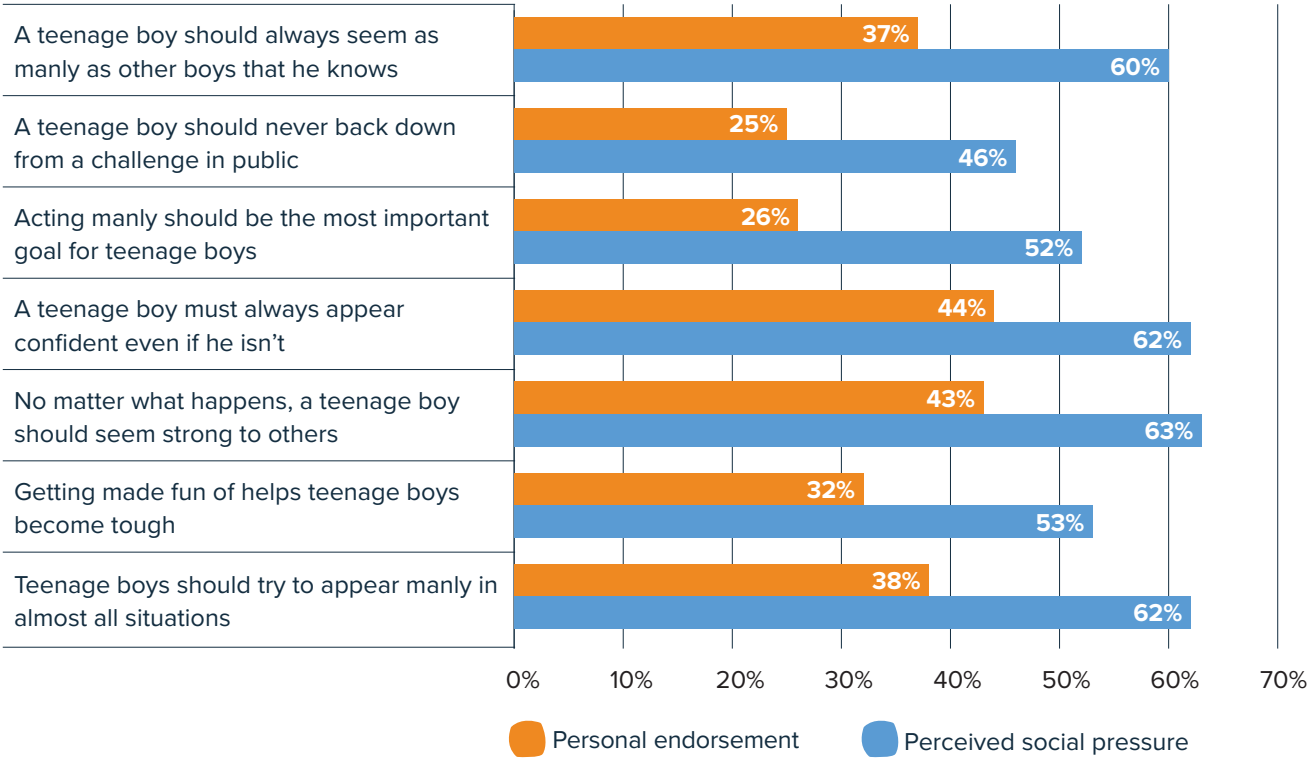
**includes boys, girls and non-binary respondents*

Despite overwhelming social pressure on adolescent boys to be manly, it was promising to find that there is a gap between young people's perceptions of social pressure and their personal agreement with rigid masculine norms.

For the vast majority of the 27 Adolescent Man Box rules, there were more adolescents who did not agree with that rule compared with the number who did, as shown in Figure 1. For each of the rules in the 'Constant effort to be manly' pillar, there were more boys who perceived social pressure compared with those who personally agreed with the rule (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Proportion of boys who personally endorsed Adolescent Man Box rules compared with those who perceived social pressure (n=655)

Percentage of boys aged 14-18 who personally endorsed ('In my opinion...') compared with the percentage of boys who perceived social pressure ('Most people in Australia believe...')



Girls agree with restrictive forms of masculinity at much lower rates than boys.

For girls, agreement was rarely above 15% and often in the single figures. Whereas for boys there were much higher levels of agreement of all aspects of restrictive masculinity.

So why do rigid masculine norms in adolescence matter?

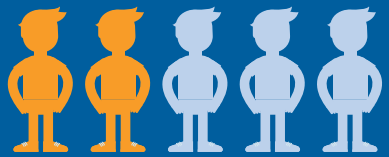
The more strongly adolescent boys hold rigid views about masculinity, the more likely they are to cause harm to others.

When we divide boys into five groups ('quintiles') according to their level of agreement with the Adolescent Man Box rules, we see a particularly concerning picture for the group who most strongly agree with these rules. These boys are far more likely than their peers to have used a form of bullying, physical violence or sexual harassment in the past month (see Figure 3).

Nearly two in five boys (39%) in quintile 5

(strongest agreement with masculinity rules)

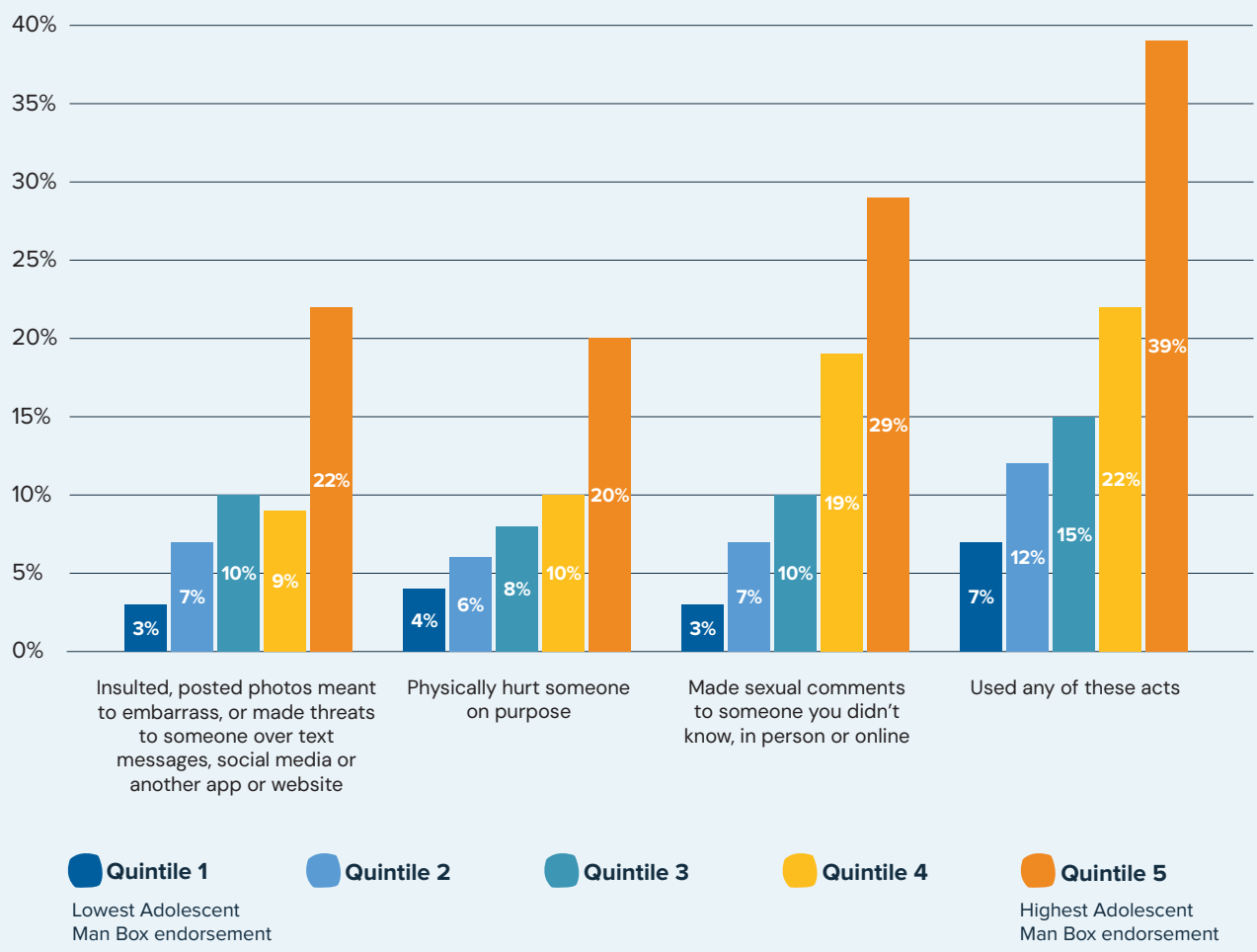
had used bullying, physical violence or sexual harassment in the past month.



Compared with 7% of boys in quintile 1 (lowest agreement).

Figure 3: Proportion of boys who reported using bullying, physical violence or sexual harassment behaviours, by quintile (n=655)

Percentage of 14-18 year old male respondents who reported using each behaviour in the past month



The more strongly adolescent boys hold rigid views about masculinity, the more likely they are to experience harm themselves.

The adolescent boys who most strongly agree with the Adolescent Man Box are more likely than other boys to have been physically hurt on purpose, insulted or threatened, or sexually harassed. More than a quarter of boys in this group had experienced being physically hurt on purpose in the past month. They are also more likely to report risk-taking behaviour (such as alcohol consumption, gambling and physical fights), and to report poor mental health.

Implications

There is an important opportunity for all of us to help reduce the social pressure on adolescent boys to conform to narrow, rigid ideas of masculinity. Challenging these norms should not fall on boys alone – everyone has a role in supporting boys to develop respectful, diverse and authentic expressions of masculinity.

This means equipping parents to guide their sons in building respectful relationships, handling rejection, managing digital boundaries, and navigating issues related to pornography and violence. It also means providing boys with positive, varied examples of masculinities across a range of settings, including online environments.