



True North in  
Canadian public policy

# Straight Talk

August 2018

## *Straight Talk with Jamil Jivani*

As the mass shooting on Toronto's Danforth Avenue on July 22<sup>nd</sup> and the attack on a group of pedestrians on Toronto's Yonge Street by a van driver on April 23<sup>rd</sup> both illustrate, Canada is no stranger to acts of violent extremism, often perpetrated by young men drawn to radical ideology. In this edition of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute's Straight Talk, we spoke with community activist and lawyer Jamil Jivani about the roots of this problem. Jivani is the author of the book *Why Young Men? Rage, Race and the Crisis of Identity*.



Jamil Jivani was born and raised in Toronto. He is a visiting professor at Toronto's Osgoode Hall Law School, where he focuses on issues affecting youth, immigrants and low-income families. He founded the Citizen Empowerment Project, which leads initiatives related to policing, racial profiling, democratic participation and economic development. Jivani attended Yale Law School and served as president of the Yale Black Law Students Association. Since graduating he has practised corporate law in Toronto, acted as a management consultant and was named the 2015 Young Lawyer of the Year by the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers.

Photo: Wim Van Cappellen

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**MLI: The Toronto van attack on Yonge Street and the mass shooting that took place on Danforth Avenue have rightly focused Canadian attention on the growing instances of young men being drawn to radical ideologies. As the author of *Why Young Men? Rage, Race and the Crisis of Identity*, we are pleased that you are able to join us to discuss these issues. Could you first tell us a bit about your book's origins and how you came to write it?**

**Jamil Jivani:** I was teaching at Osgoode Hall Law School at York University and wanted to undertake some research. In November 2015, around about the time I was deciding what kind of research to pursue, the Paris attacks took place. The Paris attacks were a combination of the issues that I was looking at domestically in Canada, such as alienation of young people, particularly young men feeling disconnected from opportunity and being resentful toward society – and expressing themselves through violence. In the Paris attacks, I saw a familiar kind of rage that has existed in a lot of the neighbourhoods that I've lived and worked in.

A couple of months after the attacks I travelled to Belgium since the Paris attackers were from that country. And, also of note, the Islamic State had one of its most successful terror cells located in a neighbourhood in Brussels. I conducted a few months of research, initially thinking that what I was going to learn would wind up giving me the background for an academic article or perhaps a magazine article. But I soon settled on the book format. I felt that the nuance and detail required to tell the stories of young men vulnerable to destructive ideologies would be better done in a lengthier book rather than a shorter format.

The book that emerged is a lot more personal than most other policy books out there. I included reflections on my own home life growing up, my family life, and what my father's absence meant for me. I initially envisioned a more analytical book. But, as I was interviewing these young men in Belgium – followed by research in Egypt and writing at length about communities in North America – I felt I owed the young men I was writing about a certain reciprocal honesty, openness, and vulnerability.

By illustrating my own life experience and my trials and tribulations growing up, and how close I came to making some kind of violent and harmful decisions myself – this became a way of humanizing some of the young men that we only read about in news stories and tend to see as almost monsters. So that's more or less the origin of the book, and why it combines a personal story with ideas and policy discussion.

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**MLI: It's a powerful story. Can you give people a sense of how you went from almost purchasing a gun at age 16 and choosing a gangster's life to graduating from Yale Law School and starting this extraordinary career that has led to you becoming a critically-acclaimed author?**

**Jamil Jivani:** I think what's true about my story – and also what's true about a lot of men I write about in the book – is that the risk of going down a bad path is there almost by default. At least, in the absence of having a positive role model, positive institutions, and a healthy way to look at the world and deal with the problems one encounters in daily life.

In the beginning, I was searching for meaning. And I found that in the narrative of petty criminals and the Hollywood gangster sub-culture that is bought and sold in North America at the cost of our young people. I had tentatively explored that lifestyle. As I describe in the book, it was a bit like playing a game of chicken. In

Grade 9, you're getting into a fight in the cafeteria; in Grade 10, you're getting suspended from school; then you just keep trying to one-up yourself. And there was the moment when I was 16 in Grade 11 and almost fired a gun in an attempt to emulate the role models I had found by default. And that could have led me to destroy the lives of others, perhaps even myself.

But I was fortunate in some of the good choices I made, and in some of the support that I had along the way – the stability at home and the efforts of my single mom. That helped save me from crossing a line that's difficult to return from, where owning a gun becomes normal and the prospect of killing a person becomes easy to imagine. As I reflect in the book, I think that the day that I almost bought the gun was a real turning point for me. I didn't make a bad decision that day, and from there I was able to reorient my approach to school and rethink how I spent my time and who I hung around with.

Over the years, I was able to become a successful student and the prospect of having a normal life became real to me. But we know that's not always the case for everyone. I hope that's the take-away from hearing a story like mine: you have this young guy who, at 22, was getting a scholarship to attend Yale Law School, but at 16 was considered illiterate and almost bought a gun. That dramatic change all took place within the span of six years.

The young men who buy the guns, who wind up in prison, who are drawn to violence as a way of dealing with their problems, I think those young men are also a short six years away from a potentially good life if they have the right interventions. That's the take-away I have from my life and that's why it was easy for me to write about people who are terrorists and criminals and gangsters – and yet still have some degree of optimism and hope they could be reformed.

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**MLI: Your life experience also enables you to bring a remarkable degree of empathy to people who are often seen as monsters with no redeeming quality or dignity. And people who – let's be honest – have done some terrible things. How were you able to maintain your empathy and dispassion?**

**Jamil Jivani:** I can relate to a young man who's tempted to join a gang. But I'd be lying if I said that it's easy to relate to someone who becomes a neo-Nazi. So there's a limit to how much one's life experience prepares you for the wide range of violence that young men are capable of.

I think my empathy is rooted in the fundamental belief that the men I interviewed in Belgium are walking symbols of lost potential. If you see the personal struggle that a lot of these young guys go through, it becomes easy to see that these are people trying to respond to their circumstances. Often they have the wrong tools to respond well, or the wrong ideas – and in some cases the wrong intentions. The end result is that they end up inflicting their own unhappiness onto others. But when you see them as people responding to their circumstances and trying to change their life in some way, then you can imagine that there could be the spark that turns into something good.

Just think of someone being so unhappy with their life that they look to extreme ideologies on the Internet to help explain their situation. But imagine if they turned instead to something beautiful and positive. They could become far more beneficial to society, if given the right mentorship and support and the right moral compass. A lot of my empathy is rooted in this lost potential. By understanding the people who become

these monsters, you might be able to save a lot of young guys and, in so doing, save the contributions that they could make to society.

It is also hard for me to look at my life and not see someone who is walking proof of that fact. I could have been written off many times in my life. In high school, there were teachers who would have described me as a bad person beyond saving. Young people enter our criminal justice system all the time whose lives are forever damaged because of mistakes they've made, who are treated as beyond saving. I have a hard time believing that that's true.

I grew up with people who were seen by others as violent, harmful, and destructive monsters. And because I grew up with them, I was forced to see their humanity. I think that also makes me determined to see that people can change.

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**MLI: You mentioned earlier that your book is at least partly autobiographical and weaves your personal story into the bigger picture. That's a particularly powerful aspect of the book. But, in some ways, describing *Why Young Men?* as a biography minimizes the extent to which it's a serious work of scholarship. You've discussed much of the literature on a range of issues, from fatherlessness, to economic dislocation, to social mobility, and so on.**

**Would you talk briefly about what you discovered in analyzing the overwhelming body of research on the impact that fatherlessness has on the individual and our society as a whole?**

**Jamil Jivani:** The research out there has been very effective at painting a picture of how fatherlessness puts a lot of young men in a position of deficit – where they're looking for the things they don't have in terms of role models and support. And of course there are some very meaningful ways in which fathers contribute to a young person's life.

When we say “role model,” I find the term almost obscure or generic in some sense. But the scholarship reveals that a lot of what is involved in being a role model is about showing boys, and in many cases girls, what it looks like to use your strength. What does it look like to feel protected? What does it look like to be loved by two people and not having, in the absence of a father, a reminder that you've been rejected in some way? When a father is present, there's a certain stability in the household that's important. There's a lengthy record of young people turning to drugs, alcohol, crime, or unhealthy sexual relations as a way of filling some of the emotional pain that comes with feeling abandoned by one or both parents.

This is not just a theory that pops up when we're trying to explain things like crime, or when we're trying to explain some of the cultural ailments that affect young people. Abandonment is a broader problem across the Western world. Statistics show that the influence of fathers is declining, in large part because they're not in the household. Based on the psychological literature, boys and young men are inordinately affected by fatherlessness; they have a hard time dealing with things like aggression and conflict resolution and attaining emotional maturity. And the cyclical nature of not having your father present is also well documented in the sense that it becomes an inter-generational problem. Being fatherless is not just something that affects one young man. When you aggregate fatherlessness at a cultural level – whether that's in a neighbourhood, in a city, or in a country – the impact becomes bigger than just a household problem. It becomes a broader cultural issue.

**MLI:** The intergenerational effects seem particularly pernicious, as fatherlessness is commonly transmitted through several generations. We're also seeing its tragic long-term consequences in the aftermath of the residential school system, which affects not just those who attended residential schools, but their children and grandchildren.

**Jamil Jivani:** Exactly. And you can also see it with the problem of mass incarceration in the justice system. It's easy to point to a philosophical or ideological gap where some people want to talk about dads in the house and other people want to talk about poverty and oppression in the residential schools and the justice system. I really think it's a shame to make it an either/or proposition, since these issues are so interconnected. We should be able to talk about the importance of fathers and also talk about how public policy can negatively affect families at the same time.

**MLI:** Policymakers have a pretty good understanding of the negative consequences of uneven financial endowments. And there's a lot of good policy thinking on how to try to adjust or correct for financial inequality, whether it's through generous childcare, subsidies, or generous student grants. But unequal non-financial endowments are much more difficult to correct and, in many ways, are much more fundamental and difficult to overcome. Could you make some comments or observations on that point?

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“What’s happening in the lives of young men in Europe and North America is partially a story of the limits of what materialism can solve.”

**Jamil Jivani:** I think there's a misplaced faith that these are all material problems. That more money, more government investments, and more private philanthropy would be a game changer. Certainly, money and economics are absolutely relevant. But while they are important factors, focusing on them alone is not going to change a lot of these issues.

If you look at today's social trends and the decline of institutions like religious faith-based organizations and the decline of male student engagement in public schools, I think the story of what's happening in the lives of young men in Europe and North America is partially a story of the limits of what materialism can solve. There's a cultural need for belonging – an identity component that living in a better house or attending a better funded school is not going to fix. That's a hard thing for people to accept as it makes problems harder to fix. But we should be aware of how complex these problems are to solve – and that they're not going to be solved easily with a cheque.

**MLI:** As you said in the *Globe and Mail* recently, many of these issues need to be confronted with a degree of humility. Not only are there limits to the extent to which more financial resources is the solution; in some ways the immense financial wealth and the materialism of modern society is also part of the problem. As Irving Kristol noted in his book, *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, while capitalism has been the most effective economic system for allocating scarce resources and organizing the economy, it doesn't have an ethos. There is no meaning associated with it. Kristol was talking about people being drawn to communism because of its totalizing nature – that it gave people belonging and meaning. Circumstances may have evolved, but that demand for belonging and meaning hasn't changed. Today, people are just drawn to newer, more modern forms of belonging and meaning.



**Jamil Jivani:** Absolutely. Amy Chua made a variation of that argument in her recent book, *Political Tribes*, where she said that individuals increasingly want to be able to see the world as tribeless, replaced with modernity and enlightenment. Yet, as she notes, tribalism in fact calls out to many people. And I think that speaks to the tension between where we place our emphasis in trying to overcome some of the issues we've been discussing. There are limits to how many of us benefit from the status quo economically, culturally, and politically. To those who are not benefiting from the status quo, we need to better understand what they need to feel happy and fulfilled.

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**MLI:** One of the most interesting sets of issues that I know you've grappled with is the place of individual responsibility versus the role that institutional or systemic barriers play in holding back minority groups or vulnerable people. Could you further elaborate your thinking on this area? How should we think about the role that these different factors play in our society?

**Jamil Jivani:** It's true the political right or conservatives have emphasized personal responsibility in a way that is heard by many as a denial of the systemic or institutional biases of our society. And I think that's a mistake. But it doesn't have to be one or the other. You have to account for both – the choices people make, and also the systems around them that might make one person's path to good decision making harder than another's.

If you're wanting to talk about these issues and look at them from a problem-solving perspective, I think what you want to do is take a systems approach when looking at the systems, and take a personal approach when you're talking about the people involved.

Let me be more specific. If I'm going to talk about the role of schools and education in making a young person's life better, I'm going to be speaking to teachers and principals who work in disadvantaged, struggling neighbourhoods. And I don't want those people to forget that they need to be accountable and must do their jobs really well. And that if they show up to work every day thinking that they can make mistakes but their students' personal responsibility is going to correct whatever they're not doing well, then I think that's a recipe for worse schools and a worse education system. So, when talking to people who work as part of an institution, I think you want to emphasize that there are barriers and how we can do our jobs in ways that reduce those barriers and empower people.

Now, when talking to students at that school, I'm going to talk to those students in a different way. I'll let them understand the world out there isn't fair, but you can't wait for it to change in order to pursue a better life for yourself and your family. The only thing you might have going for you is your decision-making and your ability to put your time and energy in the right places. Now, in a corporate world, that student making good choices and that teacher doing his or her job well combine to create a wonderful outcome for a young person who then goes on to college and university and has a family and a wonderful career. But you don't always get both sides of that coin. If you can frame these problems in a way that holds people accountable for what they can control, whether that's the student making choices or the teacher who's part of a system, then I think that's where you get the best balance of the two. That's my simplified version of combining the role of personal responsibility and the institution or system itself on these issues.

But, generally speaking, it's important to avoid what I call learned helplessness – the psychological concept that J.D. Vance, the author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, writes about very powerfully in his book. It's the idea that people become numb to the challenges they face, and they become overwhelmed to the point where they don't see themselves as able to affect their own environment. They're simply a product of what's done to them, as opposed to someone who can influence the world around them. And I'm very concerned that the young people who most need to feel empowered and who most need to understand the value of taking personal responsibility are also the least likely to hear the message that avoids a learned helplessness.

In my work, I try to emphasize decision points in people's lives. It doesn't hurt for people who are in government and work on policy to understand where decisions can be made. That could help facilitate good decision making as well. But it does hurt when you overemphasize the importance of public policy in the life of a young person who needs to see how she or he can make better choices for their family. And, in terms of the harm done by overemphasizing what government can do and underemphasizing what individuals can do, I'm more concerned about that than anything else.

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“Linked fate is an idea that's been used to explain how individuals see their relationship to the identity groups they belong to.”

**MLI: You have talked about something called linked fate. I think that's slightly different from learned helplessness. Could you elaborate on this concept and its similarities or differences from J.D. Vance's idea of learned helplessness?**

**Jamil Jivani:** Linked fate is an idea that's been used to explain how individuals see their relationship to the identity groups they belong to, and is particularly used when it comes to race. But I think it applies to other identity groups as well. Essentially it means that you as an individual see your future bundled with the future of your identity group.

To use race as an example, a young white man growing up would learn to see that he cannot have a prosperous and peaceful and healthy future independent of the state of the white race. When you look at it from that perspective, you can see where the dangers of that concept can lie, since it's a way of thinking that white supremacists might be promoting. But as a society, we're accustomed to see that way of thinking as a less of a problem when it applies to groups that we perceive as disadvantaged. So, if you are a young black man or a young Muslim man, then you might see your future tied to your race. And we might think that's acceptable because of the history of oppression and the fact that a lot of black or Muslim people in our society have a hard time separating their individuality from their identity because of their experiences in our society.

This idea points to where identity politics can become a problem and also where organizing around identity to fight inequality can easily bleed into the kind of extremism that we would more broadly regard as a problem. So, if I am the Anti-Defamation League in the United States, and I want to organize around the experiences of Jewish Americans, there's certainly something about that that is inherently positive. After all, it's a way of organizing that could fight back against the way law and policy and culture might negatively target and affect Jewish communities. But that kind of organizing could also become an issue if young people are socialized not to see any of their own individuality. In that case, they essentially are handing over power in order to identify themselves with whoever is the loudest voice in the room claiming to speak on behalf of their identity group, their race, their culture, or their gender.

Linked fate is where that line exists. It is one thing to say we must organize around our racial group to fight racial profiling by our local police department. It's another thing to say that we want our young people to see that they have no individual future and instead their future is only what their race looks like. The latter is the recipe for the kind of destructive tribalism that a lot of people are concerned about today when it comes to the nativism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and general discomfort with diversity that has flared up in a lot of Western political systems.

It also connects to Vance's idea of learned helplessness. Groups of various political stripes who promote a linked fate view of the world can get a lot of their power from convincing young people that they are helpless and require membership to an ideological group to change their lives. So, there's nothing you can do on your own as an individual, as a family, as a local neighbourhood, as a member of a church or mosque. Instead, your power comes from joining this ideological group. You need them to make your life better. That's the recruitment strategy for a lot of violent organizations, such as the Islamic State, where they channel an individual's dissatisfaction with their life into a need to be part of a group – and to be part of a group that is offering group-based solutions to what are often individual dissatisfactions.

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“Groups of various political stripes who promote a linked fate view of the world can get a lot of their power from convincing young people that they are helpless.”

**MLI: Recognizing that there is a role for public policy, are there particular areas that you think can enable the conditions for people to find the meaning that they are searching for and to feel like they have a real opportunity to stand up in our society?**

**Jamil Jivani:** First, I think that the role of youth workers in our society needs to be better understood, appreciated, and supported by both people in government and people with philanthropic dollars elsewhere. Youth workers are the informal adults that help to connect young people outside the mainstream institutions. Those young people might not be going to school. They might not be working. They're hanging out on a soccer field or at a basketball court. And youth workers can be the bridge between them and opportunity and membership in our society. I write about youth workers at length in the book because I think they're incredibly important, especially for the most vulnerable youth among us. Educating people about the importance of youth workers and better supporting them is one thing that I think will help young people find their individuality and their way of fitting into a society.

The second thing I would say concerns the kind of tragedies you see in the news, such as the shooting on Toronto's Danforth, or the uptick in gang violence. These tragedies cause people to miraculously be concerned about the conditions that exist in their city that they have been willing to ignore in the past. The problem is the lack of evidence-based thinking around these issues. I think all young men deserve good planning and good thinking in the policy realm. They deserve the initiatives that we're going to fund with our public dollars to be empirically tested and be evaluated. People need a reason to think that these issues are going to be solved, at least to some extent. And that is simply not happening enough.

One of the hopes I had with my book was to show that public policy does not need to be the only solution to these problems. It can be a rallying call to values and ideas and processes to help other actors in society up their game and to address these issues better. Personally, I think President Obama's "My Brother's Keeper" initiative is the best example of a politician saying that we might not have the resources or the ideas to solve this on our own, so how do we use the government's bully pulpit to galvanize other people to work with us toward our common



cause. And so, if I were prime minister, or premier, or mayor for a day, that's probably how I would want to use my time and energy – on youth workers and organizing good faith actors to support each other around evidence-based plans to make young people's lives better.

**MLI: I'd be remiss if I didn't give you a chance to talk about some of the activities that you're involved in operationalizing some of the insights unearthed in the book. What are you working on now?**

**Jamil Jivani:** One of the things I'm involved in is a small grassroots non-profit empowerment project, which runs programming mostly in the northwest area of Toronto with youth and youth workers. We mostly focus on helping people see ways that they can address their own concerns about their community and society through law and policy. We do civic education that is practical and rooted in the day-to-day concerns of young people, newcomers, and low-income families.

I'm also fortunate enough to sit on the board of a few different organizations. I just left the Children's Aid Society of Toronto. I also sit on the board of Youth Employment Services, which is the biggest youth employment service provider in Canada, and I also sit on the Wellesley Institute, which is a health policy organization that works on a lot of issues affecting low income families and young people. I try to be as active in Toronto and Canada's non-profit scene as possible. I think there's a lot of good opportunities there.

I've also been lucky enough to spend a lot of time in universities where there is plenty of good research being done. Not enough, in my opinion, of course. But a lot of good ideas are being generated at York University and I've been able to teach at Yale University. I've spent some time at Ohio State University working on the opioid crisis there. Universities and non-profits have been my focus, because I think that's where a lot of good ideas and practical solutions are being generated, and also where good people with good intentions and good ideas are needed.

I encourage people to look up some of the non-profits I mentioned and see where you might be able to volunteer or make a donation because there are a lot of good people doing good work out there.

**MLI: You have given us a great overview of the challenges facing young men and the reasons why some turn to violence – and the need to focus on both personal responsibility and systemic factors in our efforts to find solutions to this problem. Thank you for talking to us on this important issue.**

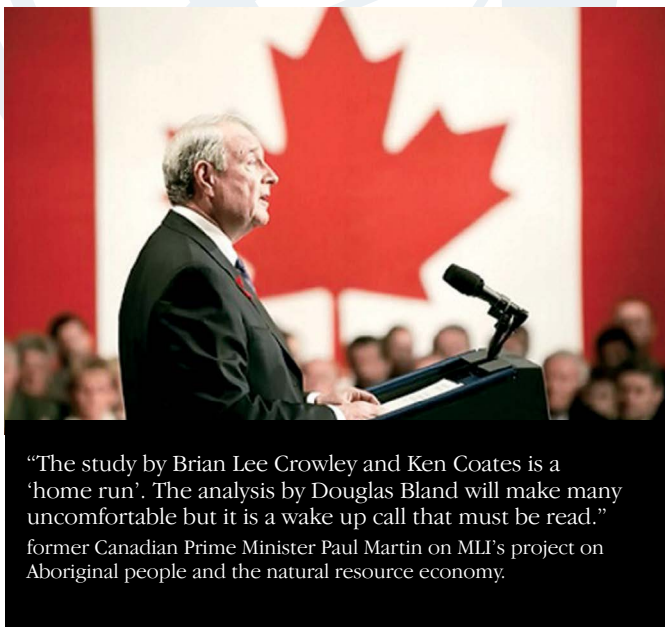


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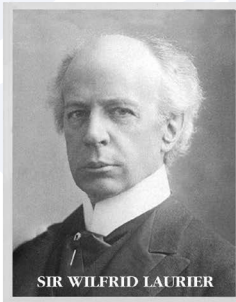
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