



**EVIDENCE
LIBRARY**

Reframing Masculinity and the Justice System

A Review of the Evidence



Dr Sophie King-Hill
Associate Professor
University of Birmingham

CLiNKS
Supporting the voluntary sector
working in the criminal justice system

About the author



Dr Sophie King-Hill is an Associate Professor in the Health Services Management Centre at the University of Birmingham. She specialises in sexual behaviours and assessment in children and young people, sexual health, sibling sexual behaviour and abuse, masculinities, relationships & sex education and the importance of youth voice. Much of her work is cross-sector, cross-disciplinary and centred around participatory and co-design approaches with young people. Sophie also has an interest in policy implementation, transfer and success frameworks and evaluation strategies. Previously, she worked extensively in the third sector in the field of education and sexual health with many diverse groups such as teenage parents and young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Published by Clinks © 2026. All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise indicated, no part of this publication may be stored in a retrievable system or reproduced in any form without prior written permission from Clinks. Clinks will give sympathetic consideration to requests from small organisations for permission to reproduce this publication in whole or in part but the terms upon which such reproduction may be permitted will remain at Clinks' discretion. Clinks and the author are not legally trained or qualified. Any information or guidance given in this publication should not be taken as a substitute for professional legal advice. Clinks is unable to accept liability for any loss or damage or inconvenience arising as a consequence of the use of any information provided in this guide.

Why read this evidence review?

- To understand how masculinity is a social construct
- To explore how masculinity is a key but under-recognised driver of offending behaviour?
- To understand the benefits of a balanced approach which holds men and boys accountable for their behaviour while empathises and exploring the consequences of the social pressures on them.
- To learn how these issues are exacerbated by the digital environment and growing, damaging manosphere rhetoric
- To consider how a gendered, trauma-informed approach can help co-produce effective interventions which benefit both young men and their victims.

Reframing Masculinity and the Justice System

Key insight

Public understanding of crime is often shaped by simplified narratives about dangerous men and criminal behaviour. However, evidence shows that masculinity itself, how it is socially constructed, performed and experienced, is a critical but under recognised driver of offending, vulnerability and engagement with the justice system. Reframing how we view the impacts of masculinity is important when building more effective, evidence informed public narratives about crime and justice (King-Hill, 2025). It is important to note that reframing masculinity is not about excusing harmful behaviour, clear consequences and accountability remain central, but it is about ensuring responses address the underlying drivers of that behaviour (King-Hill, 2025).

A note on reframing

Reframing refers to the process of reconceptualising an issue by shifting the perspective through which it is understood, enabling alternative interpretations and solutions to emerge (APA, 2018; King-Hill, 2025). Reframing masculinity allows behaviours associated with harm or offending to be understood not as fixed traits, but as products of social expectations and pressures, particularly those linked to hegemonic and precarious forms of masculinity (King-Hill, 2025; Kaufman, et al 2003; Jonas; 2005; Throop, 2009). Ultimately, reframing creates space for more effective responses by replacing blame based narratives with a nuanced, evidence informed understanding that supports prevention, engagement and positive identity development (King-Hill, 2025).

Reframing masculinity is an important component for improving public understanding of crime and developing more effective justice responses. In this context, reframing refers to the process of shifting how masculinity is interpreted and viewed, moving away from fixed, deficit based narratives toward a more nuanced understanding of how identities are shaped by social, cultural and structural factors (King-Hill, 2025). Masculinity is often framed in public discourse as inherently problematic, with men and boys positioned as a homogenous group associated with risk, harm and violence. However, this framing is inaccurate and counterproductive, as masculinity is not a fixed trait; it is a socially constructed and evolving concept shaped by historical, cultural and environmental influences (King-Hill, 2025). As such, behaviours commonly associated with offending are not inevitable, but emerge within particular social contexts that can be changed.

Precarious Masculine Positions

Central to reframing is the concept of precarious masculinity, whereby masculine identity is experienced as something that must be continually achieved and maintained and proven to other males (King-Hill, 2025). This insecurity of identity can drive behaviours frequently encountered within the justice system, including risk taking, aggression and resistance to authority. When viewed through this lens, these behaviours can be understood not solely as individual failings, but as attempts to navigate social expectations of masculinity under conditions of pressure and uncertainty.

Reframing also involves shifting away from blame based narratives. Broad brush portrayals of boys and men as inherently problematic can reinforce shame, defensiveness and disengagement, particularly among those already experiencing marginalisation (King-Hill, 2025). Such approaches risk pushing individuals toward harmful identities and ideologies, including those found within online misogynistic communities, which offer simplistic explanations for complex experiences of exclusion and grievance (King-Hill, 2025). In contrast, reframing positions boys and men as participants in solutions rather than problems to be managed.

A reframed approach highlights that restrictive masculine norms are harmful not only to others, but also to men themselves. Expectations around emotional suppression, dominance and self-reliance are closely linked to poor mental health outcomes, reduced help-seeking behaviours and increased vulnerability to harm (King-Hill, 2025). An example of this can be seen in consent discourse and how discussions of consent often overlook boys' rights to refuse, calling attention to a significant gap in policy and societal conversations about male vulnerability and autonomy (King-Hill, 2025c). Recognising this dual impact provides a more balanced and evidence informed basis for public discussion, supporting messaging that is both accountable and empathetic. Reframing requires a shift toward preventative and participatory approaches. Evidence demonstrates that young men value safe spaces to explore identity, relationships and emotions without judgement and that engagement improves when they are included as active contributors to conversations about gender and harm (King-Hill, 2025). This includes embedding gender informed and co-designed approaches within education, youth work and justice practice, alongside developing critical literacy around digital environments that increasingly shape masculine identities.

Precarious Masculinity in the Context of Crime and Justice

Precarious masculinity is key to understanding patterns of behaviour within the criminal justice system. It refers to masculinity as a fragile social status that must be continually achieved and demonstrated, rather than a stable or inherent identity (Vandello and Bosson, 2013; King-Hill, 2025). As a result, some young men may engage in behaviours such as risk taking, aggression or resistance to authority as a way of asserting or defending masculine identity to other males, particularly in contexts where status feels uncertain (King-Hill, 2025).

In contemporary society, this precariousness is heightened by conflicting expectations. Traditional norms emphasising dominance and emotional control remain influential, while modern expectations increasingly promote equality and emotional openness (King-Hill, 2025). For young men in contact with the justice system, navigating these contradictions can create instability, where behaviour becomes a means of managing identity pressure rather than simply an expression of individual intent (King-Hill, 2026; King-Hill, 2025b).

The relevance to crime and justice lies in how these dynamics shape both behaviour and engagement. When masculinity is perceived as easily threatened, challenges within institutional settings, such as authority, accountability or perceived loss of control, can trigger defensive or oppositional responses. This can affect compliance, escalation of conflict and responsiveness to interventions.

At the same time, the expectation to suppress vulnerability limits help seeking and contributes to poor mental health outcomes, which are closely linked to offending trajectories (King-Hill, 2025).

Understanding masculinity identity as precarious and fragile shifts the focus from individual blame to the social conditions underpinning behaviour, offering a more effective framework for prevention, engagement and intervention within the justice system. Public discourse on crime frequently relies on deficit framing, particularly in relation to men and boys, positioning them as inherently problematic. This individualised, blame based approach obscures the broader social and structural contexts in which behaviour is shaped. In particular, it overlooks the role of rigid masculine norms, such as dominance, control and emotional suppression, which are socially constructed and learned rather than innate traits (King-Hill, 2025; Connell, 1995).

Deficit framing also reinforces stigma and disengagement, when boys and men are consistently portrayed as risks or problems, it can generate defensiveness, shame and resistance, limiting their willingness to engage with support or interventions (King-Hill, 2025). This is especially significant in the digital age, where exclusion from mainstream narratives can increase susceptibility to harmful online communities that provide alternative identities and validation (King-Hill, 2025; Sugiura, 2021). Deficit based narratives restrict the scope of public solutions, by framing crime solely in terms of individual responsibility, rather than an accumulation of interplaying factors, which narrows understanding of prevention and shifts attention away from relational, developmental and structural interventions, including early support, education and holistic approaches. As a result, opportunities to address the underlying drivers of harm are reduced, reinforcing reactive rather than preventative responses within the justice system (King-Hill, 2025).

The intersectional, internal and external conflicts

A reframing approach requires recognising that masculinity is not monolithic. Young men's experiences are shaped by intersecting identities, including class, race, sexuality and socio-economic context, which influence how masculinity is expressed and experienced (King-Hill, 2025; Connell, 1995, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Treating boys and men as a single, uniform group obscures these differences and limits the effectiveness of interventions. Evidence from participatory work with young men highlights the importance of recognising the tension between internal identity and external expectations, where boys often feel pressure to perform dominant and emotionally restricted forms of masculinity that conflict with their lived experience (King-Hill, 2025).

Central to this is the conflict between the internal self, comprising emotions, vulnerabilities and individual identity and the external self, shaped by societal expectations of masculinity (King-Hill, 2025). Men and boys often experience pressure to conform to dominant masculine norms, including emotional suppression, toughness and control, even when these contradict their internal experiences. This dynamic reflects the broader 'boy code', where deviation from expected masculine behaviours can result in shame or social exclusion (Pollack, 1998).

Within justice contexts, this conflict can manifest in behaviours such as aggression, risk-taking or disengagement, which serve as attempts to align the external self with perceived expectations. However, these behaviours are not simply individual choices but are embedded within wider social structures and identity pressures. Recognising the intersectional nature of male identities, alongside these internal and external tensions, provides a more nuanced understanding of behaviour and highlights the need for responses that address identity, context and lived experience rather than relying solely on deficit-based explanations (King-Hill, 2025).

Rigid Masculine Norms and Harm

Rigid masculine norms are closely linked to a range of harmful behaviours within justice contexts. Norms emphasising dominance, control and emotional suppression are associated with violence, coercive control, sexual harm and harassment, resistance to authority, risk taking behaviours and poor emotional regulation, shaping how individuals respond to conflict and power (King-Hill, 2025; Connell, 1995). Simultaneously, these norms have significant impacts on men themselves. Expectations to be self-reliant and emotionally stoic contribute to reluctance to seek help, increased substance misuse and poorer mental health outcomes and high self harm and suicide rates, reinforcing cycles of harm that can intersect with offending (King-Hill, 2025). This dual impact, harm directed towards others and harm towards themselves, provides a critical foundation for reframing justice narratives. It highlights that addressing masculinity is not about removing accountability, but about understanding the social drivers of behaviour in order to support more effective prevention, engagement and rehabilitation.

Masculinity in the Digital Age: Online Risks

The digital age is reshaping how masculinity is constructed and performed, introducing new risks for men and boys. Online environments, including social media, gaming platforms and forums, act as key sites of socialisation, where ideas about gender, relationships and identity are formed and reinforced (King-Hill, 2025). Within these spaces, the emergence of the manosphere, including incel communities, has amplified harmful narratives that frame masculinity through grievance, entitlement and opposition to women (King-Hill, 2025; Sugiura, 2021).

These communities often offer simplistic explanations for complex experiences of rejection, loneliness and marginalisation, attributing personal difficulties to perceived structural disadvantage against men. In doing so, they provide a sense of belonging and identity, particularly for those already experiencing insecurity or exclusion (King-Hill, 2025). However, these narratives can normalise misogyny, reinforce rigid and hegemonic masculine ideals, and in some cases legitimise violence as a means of reclaiming status. The algorithm driven nature of digital platforms further exacerbates these risks, creating echo chambers that amplify extreme views and limit exposure to alternative perspectives (King-Hill, 2025).

For young men navigating precarious identities, this can intensify these internal and external conflicts and increase susceptibility to harmful ideologies. Addressing these risks requires not only digital literacy and critical engagement, but also broader efforts to provide alternative, positive frameworks for masculinity that are inclusive, emotionally literate and grounded in equality.

Masculinity in Transition: An Incomplete Adaptation

It is useful to consider the wider contexts of modern masculinity. Contemporary challenges around masculinity and crime can be understood as the result of a shift in gender roles that has been unevenly supported across society. While significant progress has been made in advancing the rights and roles of women (with the caveat that there is still a long way to go), there has been comparatively limited attention given to how boys and men should adapt to these changes (King-Hill, 2025). This has created a gap in guidance and support, leaving many men and boys navigating conflicting expectations around identity, power and relationships. Over time, this absence has contributed to confusion, resentment and vulnerability, particularly in contexts shaped by inequality and exclusion and has been further amplified by digital environments and emerging online ideologies.

Evidence from Practice and Research

The arguments presented in this paper are underpinned not only by theory (i.e. Connell, 2005; Pollack, 1998; Vandello and Bosson, 1998) but also by a series of research projects led by Dr Sophie King-Hill, which collectively function as case studies demonstrating how masculinity, identity and behaviour intersect in ways that are directly relevant to the justice system (King-Hill, 2025). These projects span multiple contexts, including education, online spaces, professional environments and safeguarding practice. Many of these have culminated in free resources for professionals (King-Hill, 2026b).

Key studies she has led include research on the sexual behaviours of young people aged 13–18, which challenges assumptions that boys are uniformly sexually risky or harmful, instead revealing diverse, socially influenced behaviours shaped by development, relationships and context. Work on harmful sexual behaviour and helpline data similarly highlights how behaviours are often rooted in misunderstanding, lack of guidance and exposure to problematic norms rather than inherent deviance. Alongside this, her work on Incels explores how online communities construct grievance based masculinities, linking isolation, vulnerability, identity conflict and misogyny to pathways that can escalate into harm and, in some cases, justice involvement. Further research studies she has led examined masculinity within institutional settings, including research on masculinity in the fire service, which demonstrates how organisational cultures shaped by narrow masculine norms influence behaviour, authority relations, wellbeing and reporting practices. Complementing this are participatory projects such as the We're in This Together (WITT) project, which young men's voices and centres' perspectives on identity, relationships and gender norms (see King-Hill, 2025).

Across these studies, consistent themes emerged the importance of identity formation, the tension between internal and external expectations, and the role of social and cultural context in shaping behaviour. For the justice system, these findings emphasise that behaviours associated with offending must be understood within these broader frameworks, supporting approaches that integrate identity, context and early intervention alongside accountability (King-Hill, 2025).

Reframing Masculinity in Interventions: Practical Guidance for Professionals

Reframing masculinity provides an important conceptual and practical foundation for strengthening interventions with boys and young men already involved in the criminal justice system. As outlined in this work, a gender informed understanding of behaviour enables practitioners to move beyond surface level interpretations of offending and instead locate behaviour within broader social, relational and identity based contexts. In practice, this shifts intervention away from purely compliance driven or punitive models and towards approaches that are more responsive to the lived experiences of boys and young men.

A gendered lens

A key implication of this reframing is the need for practitioners to interpret behaviour through a gendered lens. This involves recognising how rigid and often harmful masculine norms can underpin patterns of aggression, risk taking, harmful sexual behaviours and resistance to help seeking. Within professional interventions, this requires practitioners to explicitly address how expectations around strength, dominance, emotional suppression and peer status shape behaviour and decision making. Rather than treating these behaviours as isolated risk factors, they are understood as socially reinforced responses that can be challenged and reshaped. This is further underscored by King-Hill (2025d), who argues that safeguarding frameworks frequently fail boys by not explicitly naming their experiences of violence (for example, using the term violence against women and girls instead of violence against women and children in all cases rather than allowing for the nuanced difference between the two), reinforcing the need for gender-responsive approaches that recognise both their vulnerabilities and the social contexts shaping their behaviours.

Engage with harmful narratives

Linked to this is the importance of directly engaging with harmful narratives. Interventions should create space to explore and challenge beliefs associated with misogyny, entitlement and peer dynamics that underpin offences such as domestic abuse and sexual harm. This work should be undertaken in a way that avoids reinforcing shame and defensiveness. Instead, practitioners should facilitate critical reflection, enabling boys and young men to recognise the impact of their behaviour while developing alternative, pro-social ways of understanding themselves and others.

Positive identities

Promoting positive identity development is central to this process, reframing masculinity allows interventions to move beyond deficit based models and instead support boys and young men to construct identities that incorporate empathy, emotional literacy and accountability. This includes helping individuals to develop the skills to recognise and regulate emotions, engage in perspective taking, and take responsibility for harm caused. This approach positions change as both possible and meaningful, rather than framing individuals solely in terms of risk or offending histories. Focussing upon the strengths and positives that men and boys have in their wider lives and individual identities is also a useful approach to planning interventions and recognising that the instigators behind behaviours rather than just focussing upon the behaviours themselves.

Building trust

Effective intervention also depends on enhancing engagement through trust building and relational practice. Acknowledging the pressures that boys and young men face, particularly in relation to expectations of masculinity, can support the development of more authentic and productive practitioner/service user relationships. Creating safe spaces for dialogue about identity, behaviour and experience is essential, particularly for those who may have limited prior opportunities to explore these issues constructively.

A trauma-informed approach

The interplay between masculinity and mental health further underscores the need for a reframed approach. Many behaviours linked to offending are connected to unresolved trauma, identity conflict and unmet emotional needs. Traditional punitive only responses risk exacerbating these issues by reinforcing shame and harmful norms. In contrast, trauma informed and gender responsive interventions shift the focus towards rehabilitation, recognising the underlying drivers of behaviour while maintaining accountability. This includes embedding emotional literacy and resilience within programmes, as well as normalising help seeking in ways that challenge stigma.

Individual responses take into account intersectional identity

Interventions should also be responsive to difference, an intersectional approach is critical, ensuring that the experiences of boys and men are understood in relation to race, class, sexuality and other structural factors. Avoiding rigid models enables more tailored and effective responses, particularly for those whose experiences of marginalisation may compound involvement in the CJS.

Joint work with mental health

Collaborative working is another key component, early and sustained engagement with mental health services can support more integrated and holistic interventions, reducing the risk of escalation and enabling a more coordinated response to complex needs. This reflects the broader shift towards recognising offending behaviour as situated within wider systems of support, rather than as an isolated issue to be addressed solely within the justice system.

Recognise the importance of online spaces

Recognising the increasing influence of digital environments highlights the importance of incorporating digital literacy into interventions. Online spaces can play a significant role in reinforcing misogynistic ideologies and unrealistic masculine ideals. However, some online spaces are healthy and can support positive behaviours. Supporting boys and men to critically engage with these environments is therefore a safeguarding priority, particularly in relation to preventing the normalisation of harmful beliefs and behaviours.

A holistic approach

Taken together, these elements demonstrate how reframing masculinity can inform the design and delivery of more effective interventions within the CJS. By integrating gender informed, trauma-aware and strengths based approaches, practitioners are better equipped to support meaningful behavioural change, while also contributing to broader efforts to reduce harm and promote safer communities.

Conclusion

Reframing masculinity is an important factor in improving both public understanding of crime and the effectiveness of justice responses. The evidence demonstrates that masculinity is simultaneously part of the problem and part of the solution. Rigid masculine norms contribute to violence, disengagement and harm, yet more positive constructions of masculinity, centred on empathy, accountability and emotional literacy, offer clear pathways for rehabilitation (King-Hill, 2025). Additionally, boys and men require support rather than punitive measures alone. Poor mental health and barriers to help-seeking are not peripheral issues but central risk factors that shape behaviour and engagement within the justice system. Addressing these issues early, particularly during adolescence, is critical. Education, relationships and sex education (RSHE), and youth work all play a vital role as preventative tools, shaping identity before harmful patterns become entrenched (King-Hill, 2025; King-Hill 2025e). Solely blame based approaches are ineffective as they reinforce shame and defensiveness, pushing some individuals further from support and, in certain cases, toward harmful ideologies. Instead, more effective responses recognise boys and men as partners in change, not problems to be managed. Participatory approaches that centre their voices and lived experiences improve engagement, legitimacy and outcomes (King-Hill, 2025). A justice system that integrates accountability with a deeper understanding of masculinity will be better equipped to prevent harm, support rehabilitation and contribute to safer, more inclusive communities. Reframing masculinity involves moving from simplistic, deficit based narratives toward a complex, evidence informed understanding of how gender norms shape behaviour. This shift is essential for influencing public opinion and criminal justice systems in ways that support effective prevention and interventions, more meaningful engagement with boys and men, and more safer and more inclusive communities

References

- Jonas, W. (2005). Reframing. Mosby's dictionary of complementary and alternative medicine (1st ed.). Elsevier.
- Kaufman, S., Elliott, M., & Shmueli, D. (2003). Frames, framing and reframing. *Beyond Intractability*, 1,1–8.
- King-Hill, S. (2025) Reframing Masculinity for Young Men and Boys: We're in This Together. Cham: Springer Nature.
- King-Hill, S. (2025b) We're in this together: Reframing masculinity for young men and boys. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Health Services Management Centre. Available at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/HSMC/research/were-in-this-together.pdf>
- King-Hill, S. (2025c) The silence around the rights of boys to say "no": The missing conversation on consent. The Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys.
- King-Hill, S. (2025d). When safeguarding language fails boys: Why we must name violence against all children. The Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys.
- King-Hill, S. (2025e). Incels, misogyny, role models: what England's new relationships and sex education lessons will cover—and how young people will benefit. *The Conversation*.
- King-Hill, S. (2026) Reframing masculinity for young men and boys. Academic Insights. HM Inspectorate of Probation. Available at: <https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/document/reframing-masculinity-for-young-men-and-boys/>
- King-Hill, S. (2026b) University of Birmingham (n.d.) Reducing Harm. Available at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/projects/reducing-harm>
- Connell, R.W. (1995) *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Connell, R.W. (2005) *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Polity.
- Connell, R.W. and Messerschmidt, J.W. (2005) 'Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept', *Gender & Society*, 19(6), pp. 829–859.

References

Pollack, W.S. (1998) *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. New York: Henry Holt.

Throop, R. (2009). *Reaching your potential: Personal and professional development* (4th ed.). Cram 101.

Vandello, J.A. and Bosson, J.K. (2013) 'Hard won and easily lost: A review and synthesis of theory and research on precarious manhood', *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 14(2), pp. 101–113.

Sugiura, L. (2021) *The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.

Our vision

Our vision is of a vibrant, independent and resilient voluntary sector that enables people to transform their lives.

Our mission

To support, represent and advocate for the voluntary sector in criminal justice, enabling it to provide the best possible opportunities for individuals and their families.

Join Clinks: be heard, informed, and supported

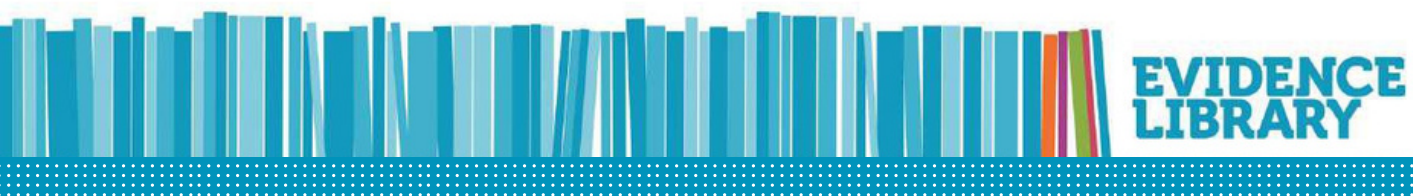
Are you a voluntary organisation supporting people in the criminal justice system?

Join our network of over 600 members. Clinks membership offers you:

- A voice to influence change
- Practical assistance to be effective and resilient
- Support from a community of like-minded professionals.

Membership starts at just £80 per year and is free for organisations with little income.

www.clinks.org/membership



An online evidence base for the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

This article forms part of a series from Clinks, created to develop a far-reaching and accessible evidence base covering the most common types of activity undertaken within the criminal justice system. There are two main aims of this online series:

1. To increase the extent to which the voluntary sector bases its services on the available evidence base
2. To encourage commissioners to award contracts to organisations delivering an evidence-based approach.

Each article has been written by a leading academic with particular expertise on the topic in question. The topics are selected by Clinks' members as areas of priority interest. With the support of Russell Webster, Clinks is working towards building a comprehensive directory of the best evidence available across a wide range of criminal justice topics.

Clinks

Clinks, 82A James Carter Road, Mildenhall, Suffolk IP28 7DE

☎ 020 4502 6774 ✉ info@clinks.org

💻 www.clinks.org