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1 – A QUIET CATASTROPHE

Nicholas Eberstadt writes in [Men Without Work](#):

Over the past two generations, America has suffered a quiet catastrophe. That catastrophe is the collapse of work – for men. In the half century between 1965 and 2015, work rates for the American male spiraled relentlessly downward, and an ominous migration commenced: a “flight from work,” in which ever-growing numbers of working-age men exited the labor force altogether. America is now home to an immense army of jobless men no longer even looking for work – more than seven million alone between the ages of 25 and 55, the traditional prime of working life.

The collapse of work for America’s men is arguably a crisis for our nation – but it is a largely invisible crisis. It is almost never discussed in the public square. Somehow, we as a nation have managed to ignore this problem for decades, even as it has steadily worsened. There is perhaps no other instance in the modern American experience of a social change of such consequence receiving so little consideration by concerned citizens, intellectuals, business leaders, and policymakers.

How big is the “men without work” problem today? Consider a single fact: in 2015, the work

rate (or employment-to-population ratio) for American males ages 25-to-54 was slightly lower than it had been in 1940, which was the tail end of the Great Depression. ...

(T)he progressive detachment of so many adult American men from the reality and routines of regular paid labor poses a threat to our nation’s future prosperity. It can only result in lower living standards, greater economic disparities, and slower economic growth than we might otherwise expect. And the troubles posed by this male flight from work are by no means solely economic. It is also a social crisis – and, I shall argue, a moral crisis. The growing incapability of grown men to function as breadwinners cannot help but undermine the American family. It casts those who nature designed to be strong into the role of dependents – on their wives or girlfriends, on their parents, or on government welfare. Among those who should be most capable of shouldering the burdens of civic responsibilities, it instead encourages sloth, idleness, and vices perhaps more insidious. Whether we choose to recognize it or not, this feature of the American condition – the new “men without work” normal – is inimical to the American tradition of self-reliance; it is subversive of our national ethos and arguably even of our civilization.

2 — THE IDLE ARMY

Eberstadt again, from aei.org:

Labor Day is an appropriate moment to reflect on a quiet catastrophe: the collapse, over two generations, of work for American men. During the past half-century, work rates for US males spiraled relentlessly downward. America is now home to a vast army of jobless men who are no longer even looking for work – roughly seven million of them age 25 to 54, the traditional prime of working life.

This is arguably a crisis, but it is hardly ever discussed in the public square. Received wisdom holds that the US is at or near “full employment.” Most readers have probably heard this, perhaps from the vice chairman of the Federal Reserve, who said in a speech last week that “it is a remarkable, and perhaps underappreciated, achievement that the economy has returned to near-full employment in a relatively short time after the Great Recession.”

Near-full employment? In 2015 the work rate (the ratio of employment to population) for American males age 25 to 54 was 84.4%. That’s slightly lower than it had been in 1940, 86.4%, at the tail end of the Great Depression. Benchmarked against 1965, when American men were at genuine full employment, the “male jobs deficit” in 2015 would be nearly 10 million, even after taking into account an older population and more adults in college.

Or look at the fraction of American men age 20 and older without paid work. In the past 50 years it rose to 32% from 19%, and not mainly because of population aging. For prime working-age men, the jobless rate jumped to 15% from 6%. Most of the postwar surge involved voluntary departure from the labor force.

Until roughly the outbreak of World War II, working-age American men fell into basically two categories: either holding a paid job or unemployed. There was no “third way” for able-bodied

males. Today there is one: neither working nor seeking work – that is, men who are outside the labor force altogether. Unlike in the past, the US is now evidently rich enough to carry them, after a fashion. The no-work life hardly consigns these men to destitution.

This is at least somewhat true throughout the affluent West, but the US has led the pack.

The paradox is that Americans – those who do have jobs – are still among the rich world’s hardest-working people. No other developed society puts in such long hours, and at the same time supports such a large share of younger men neither holding jobs nor seeking them.

Who are America’s new cadre of prime-age male unworkers? They tend to be: 1) less educated; 2) never married; 3) native born; and 4) African-American. But those categories intersect in interesting ways. Black married men are more likely to be in the workforce than unmarried whites. Immigrants are more likely to be working or job-hunting than native-born Americans, regardless of ethnicity. High-school dropouts from abroad are as likely to be working or looking for work as native-born college grads.

What do unworking men do with their free time?

Sadly, not much that’s constructive. About a tenth are students trying to improve their circumstances. But the overwhelming majority are what the British call NEET: “neither employed nor in education or training.” Time-use surveys suggest they are almost entirely idle – helping out around the house less than unemployed men; caring for others less than employed women; volunteering and engaging in religious activities less than working men and women or unemployed men. For the NEETs, “socializing, relaxing and leisure” is a full-time occupation, accounting for 3,000 hours a year, much of

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this time in front of television or computer screens.

Clearly big changes in the US economy, including the decline of manufacturing and the Big Slowdown since the start of the century, have played a role. But something else is at work, too: the male flight from work has been practically linear over the past two generations, irrespective of economic conditions or recessions.

What we might call “sociological” factors are evident, not least the tremendous rise in unworking men who draw from government disability and means-tested benefit programs. There are also the barriers to work for America’s huge pool of male ex-prisoners and felons not behind bars – a poorly tracked cohort that accounts for one adult male in eight in the civilian population, excluding those in jail now.

Regardless of its cause, this new normal is inimical to America’s national interests. Declining labor-force participation and falling work rates have contributed to slower economic growth and widening gaps in income and wealth. Slower growth in turn reduces tax revenue and increases budgetary pressures, producing higher deficits and

national debt. Unworking men have increased poverty in the US, not least among the great many children whose fathers are without jobs.

There are the social effects, too. The male retreat from the labor force has exacerbated family breakdown, promoted welfare dependence and recast “disability” into a viable alternative lifestyle. Among these men the death of work seems to mean also the death of civic engagement, community participation and voluntary association.

In short, the American male’s postwar flight from work is a grave social ill. Strangely, nearly everyone – the news media, major political parties, intellectuals, business leaders, policy makers – has managed to overlook it. The urgency of the moment is to bring this invisible crisis out of the shadows.

Imagine how different America would be today if another roughly 10 million men held paying jobs. It is imperative for the future health of the country to make a determined and sustained effort to bring these detached men back – into the workplace, into their families, into civil society.

3 — QUESTIONS VITAL TO OUR FUTURE

Larry Summers writes on his [blog](#):

Job destruction caused by technology is not a futuristic concern. It is something we have been living with for two generations. A simple linear trend suggests that by mid-century about a quarter of men between 25 and 54 will not be working at any moment.

I think this is likely a substantial underestimate unless something is done for a number of reasons.

- First, everything we hear and see regarding technology suggests the rate of job destruction will pick up. Think of the elimination

of drivers, and of those who work behind cash registers.

- Second, the gains in average education and health of the workforce over the last 50 years are unlikely to be repeated.
- Third, to the extent that non-work is contagious, it is likely to grow exponentially rather than at a linear rate.
- Fourth, declining marriage rates are likely to raise rates of labor force withdrawal given that non-work is much more common for unmarried than married men.

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On the basis of these factors, *I expect that more than one-third of all men between 25 and 54 will be out of work at mid-century.*

Very likely more than half of men will experience a year of non-work at least one year out of every five. This would be in the range of the rate of non-work for high school drop-outs and exceeds the rate of non-work for African Americans today.

4 — IT'S WOMEN, TOO

Michael Snider writes on his [blog](#):

Below, I would like to share two charts with you. They show what has happened to the inactivity rates for men and for women in their prime working years in the United States in recent years.

As you can see in this first chart, the inactivity rate for men in their prime working years exploded higher during the last recession and then continued to go up even after the recession supposedly ended. At this point, it is hovering near all-time record highs.

For women, we see a similar thing. In this next chart, you can see that the inactivity rate for women in their prime working years rose during the last recession and then just kept on rising. At this point, it remains far higher than it was during the last recession.

What are we to make of all this?

For both men and women in their prime working years, the inactivity rate is significantly higher than it was during the last recession.

All of these people neither have a job nor are they looking for one.

So what in the world is going on here?

The issue isn't that people don't want to work.

The issue is that people cannot find enough work.

And even if you have a job, according to the Social

Will we be able to support these people and a growing retired share of the population? What will this mean for the American family? For prevailing ethics of self-reliance? For alienation and support for toxic populism? These are vital questions. Even more vital is the question of what is to be done. These questions should preoccupy social science researchers. They are vital to our future.

Security Administration, 51% of all American workers make less than \$30,000 a year.

Tens of millions of Americans are now among the ranks of "the working poor." Many families are watching their expenses (like health insurance) soar while their paychecks go down or stagnate.

