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HOW MEN CAN PAY A HIGH PRICE FOR TAKING A PART-TIME JOB

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For unemployed men, taking a part-time job may be nearly as damaging to their future career prospects as simply staying home.

David Pedulla, a sociologist at the University of Texas at Austin, sent out thousands of fake resumes to test how gender and work history affected callbacks by potential employers looking to interview the simulated job candidates. He found that women in part-time jobs were more than twice as likely to get a callback as were men in part-time jobs. In fact, part-time male workers fared only a little better than unemployed men.

When it comes to part-time work, there appear to be “penalties for men that are as strong as the penalty for unemployment, while for women we see no penalty,” Mr. Pedulla said.

An estimated one in six U.S. workers lost a job during the recession years of 2007, 2008 and 2009, and unemployment remained stubbornly high even years into the economic recovery. A growing body of research indicates that the financial and psychological damage from a period of joblessness can be significant and long-lasting, especially for people who remain out of work for an extended period.

The health of the U.S. labor market has improved in recent years. But there are more variables involved in finding a job than just the unemployment rate.

Mr. Pedulla’s research, published this spring in the *American Sociological Review*, involved a field experiment: 2,420 applications submitted to 1,210 job openings in five U.S. cities between November 2012 and June 2013. The resumes described male and female job candidates who had graduated from large public universities in the Midwest and had similar work histories until 12 months earlier. At that point, they were assigned one of five different experiences: a full-time job, a part-time job, a job through a temporary employment agency, a job below their skill level (a sales associate at a retail store), or unemployment.

Among both men and women with a full-time job, 10.4% got a callback from a potential employer. Workers in the low-skill job saw much lower callback rates: 4.7% for men and 5.2% for women.

“For both male and female workers, taking a job below their skill level really results in severe penalties in terms of the job opportunities that are available to them,” Mr. Pedulla said.

Temp work, on the other hand, generated a 7.1% callback rate for men –the highest in the study outside of a full-time job — and an 8.3% callback rate for women.

Employers didn’t seem to see a part-time job as a barrier to hiring women, with a callback rate of 10.9%. But for men, a part-time job translated into a 4.8% callback rate – little better than the 4.2% callback rate for unemployed men. (Unemployed women had a callback rate of 7.5%.)

Why the gender gap? Mr. Pedulla said in an interview that it's difficult to disentangle underlying causes. Based on a separate survey of hiring managers, he said, "it appears that men are penalized for part-time work in part because of employers' perception of their commitment." A part-time job, on the other hand, didn't seem to raise questions about the commitment of female job applicants.

"While there are certainly good reasons that people take any job they can find — specifically in cases where economic hardship is imminent—the experimental data presented here raise questions about whether all types of jobs actually open up new labor market opportunities for workers," Mr. Pedulla wrote in the paper. "Indeed, certain types of employment positions appear to send negative signals to future employers about workers' competence and commitment, penalizing them in similar ways to remaining unemployed."

Some of his findings echoed research released last year by Princeton University economist Henry Farber, Arizona State University economist Dan Silverman and University of California, Los Angeles economist Till von Wachter. The economists, like Mr. Pedulla, sent out resumes to track callbacks from potential employers, though their fake job candidates were all unemployed women. They, too, found that taking a "low-level interim job," such as retail cashier, greatly reduced the likelihood of a callback for a job interview.

"It appears that an unemployed worker is better off remaining unemployed and searching for work rather than being employed in a low-level job while searching," the researchers wrote in their working paper. "Alternatively, if an applicant has taken a low-level interim job, they may be better off not listing this job on their resume."

Messrs. Farber, Silverman and von Wachter also found that workers age 50 and older were less likely to receive a callback than younger applicants. They did find no relationship between callbacks and how long someone was unemployed, a finding that they noted was at odds with other recent research that has found indications of discrimination against the long-term unemployed.