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OPINION: THE IDLE ARMY: AMERICA'S UNWORKING MEN

Millions of young males have left the workforce and civic life. Full employment? The U.S. isn't even close.

By Nicholas Eberstadt
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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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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 U.S. has led the pack. Not even in dysfunctional Greece or “lost generation” Japan has the male flight from work proceeded with such alacrity. 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 this time in front of television or computer screens.

Clearly big changes in the U.S. 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 U.S., 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.

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