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'ROUTINE JOBS ARE DISAPPEARING'

By Lauren Weber
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One of the most worrying economic trends over the past few decades has been the decline of middle-class jobs in the U.S.

As "routine" jobs—often middle-class work based on a relatively narrow set of repeated tasks, such as welding-machine operators or bank tellers—disappear, many workers who would typically have held them have taken on lower-paying low-skill manual work or simply dropped out of the labor force, according to new research from a trio of economists.

The paper, called "Disappearing Routine Jobs," provides more evidence that the transformation of work in the U.S.—from an industrial economy to a digital one where routine work is automated or outsourced and the remaining jobs are concentrated in low-paid service work or high-skilled knowledge work—is contributing to the shrinking labor-force participation rate, said co-author Henry Siu, a professor at the University of British Columbia.

The share of Americans working in routine jobs has fallen from 40.5% in 1979 to 31.2% in 2014, according to the paper. The federal government's official measure of Americans age 16 and over who are working or seeking work has fallen from a recent high of 67.3% in 2000 to 62.7% in November 2016.

"Routine jobs are disappearing and more and more prime-age Americans aren't working," said Mr. Siu. "These things are two sides of the same coin."

The authors, who include Guido Cortes at the University of Manchester in England and Nir Jaimovich at the University of Southern California, also found that the impact of the loss of routine jobs fell mostly on male high-school dropouts of all ages as well as men under age 50 with high-school diplomas.

These groups have failed to move into high-paying, nonroutine jobs that require skills in areas like critical thinking and problem-solving. Instead, they have to a great extent stopped working at all, as many studies have documented.

"These groups who have been caught in the transition are not better off," said Mr. Siu. "They're working less and to the extent they're working, they're working in jobs that are lower-paying on average than the jobs they were in before."

To counter these trends, the U.S. must invest in raising the skills of the workers most likely to be affected by the disappearance of routine jobs, labor-market experts say.