

*Men Without Work*



# MEN WITHOUT WORK



*America's Invisible Crisis*

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*For Christopher C. Demuth Sr.  
Mentor, Colleague, Friend*





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## Introduction



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 twenty-five and fifty-five, 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 twenty-five-to-fifty-four was slightly lower than it had been in 1940, which was at the tail end of the Great Depression.

The general decline of work for grown men and the dramatic, continuing expansion of a class of un-working males (including both those who are ostensibly able-bodied and in the prime of life) constitute a fundamentally new and unfamiliar reality for America. So very new and unfamiliar is this crisis, in fact, that it has until now very largely gone unnoticed and unremarked upon. Our news media, our pundits, and our major political parties have somehow managed to overlook this extraordinary dislocation almost altogether.

One reason the phenomenon has escaped notice is that there have been no obvious outward signs of national distress attending the American male’s massive and continuing post-war exodus from paid employment: no national strikes, no great riots, no angry social paroxysms. In addition, America today is rich and, by all indications, getting even richer. Hence the end of work for a large, and steadily growing, share of working-age American men has been met to date with public complacency, in part because we evidently can afford to do so. And this is precisely the problem: for the genial indifference with which the rest of society has greeted the growing absence of adult men from the productive economy is in itself

powerful testimony that *these men have become essentially dispensable*.

But the 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 aging 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.

Our nation cannot begin to grapple with this challenge to our future unless we first understand its genesis, its dimensions, and its implications. In the following pages I attempt to offer a preliminary description of these.