

# Putting Men Back to Work

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*Eli Lehrer and Catherine Moyer*

PERHAPS THE CRUELEST CONSEQUENCE of almost a century of unprecedented economic, social, and technological progress is that modern America has less and less use for men, particularly those with relatively low levels of education or skills. Men's average wages, participation in the workforce, and rates of community activity have all stagnated or declined in recent years. Labor demand has fallen for many traditionally male-dominated fields like mining and heavy manufacturing, while demand for other heavily and traditionally male occupations—such as truck driving—might also soon drop because of technological advances. The result of these trends has been a mass of men who are unemployed, unengaged with civil society, uninvolved in family life, and, therefore, finding little meaning in their lives.

Men's usefulness in the workforce has been diminishing for decades, and this downward trend has only accelerated in recent years. In 1948, the earliest data available, 86.7% of men were either working or looking for work. In January 2017, that rate had fallen to 69.3%. Although there have been some periods of stability (the percentage of men taking part in the workforce was flat between 1985 and 1990, for example), the post-World War II period in the United States has included *no* sustained upticks in the percentage of males over age 18 working or looking for work. Broadly speaking, labor-force participation for men declined continually amid the prosperity of the 1950s, during the buoyant economy of the 1960s as baby boomers started going to work, and during the tech boom of the 1990s. In the wake of the Great Recession, men's workforce participation has declined from 73.4% in January 2008 to today's rate of 68.9%, among the lowest since measurement began.

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A January 2017 analysis by the Congressional Budget Office shows this is largely—though not entirely—a result of the baby-boom generation beginning to retire. On its own, that would not be terribly worrying. But it masks a more concerning trend: While women are working more, men are working less. The trend line is particularly bleak for low-skilled men and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Recent work by the National Bureau of Economic Research shows that, among those born in poverty, women are far more likely than men to go to work at all.

Every major labor-force forecast suggests we should expect more of the same for the remainder of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Women today constitute slightly less than 47% of all workers, and their share of the workforce continues to rise, even as their participation rate drops slightly, largely as a result of retirements and more women seeking higher education. Men may well remain a slight majority of the workforce for some time to come, but the world of work is increasingly a female one. And, troublingly, a large share of the men who have dropped out of the workforce are not picking up the slack in other areas of human activity, leaving them adrift.

To address the problem of male joblessness, policymakers, educators, employers, and concerned citizens should strongly consider public and private efforts to encourage more males to enter traditionally female-dominated jobs. Doing this will require rejiggering the policies that encouraged women to enter “male” fields to help attract men to “female” fields, as well as developing new policies that better serve the particular needs of men. These include state and local efforts at job training and career recruitment, along with national reforms to the criminal-justice system, the occupational-licensing regime, and health-care and workplace benefits.

By disengaging from work, family, and communal involvement, men are depriving themselves of the sources of worth and purpose that are essential to a meaningful life, and the rest of society suffers along with them. Giving them a hand up and helping to restore their sense of purpose should be one of the nation’s highest priorities.

#### WORKING WOMEN

Women’s growing role in the workforce isn’t necessarily due to men being slackers—though, as we discuss later, some are. Rather, today’s world of work is simply friendlier to women than men. In its 2015 list

of the 20 fastest-growing careers, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found only five (for which data are available) that are more than 50% male. All of the others—including seven of the top 10—were more than half female. Among occupations that were more than 90% male, the one predicted to grow at the fastest rate was wind-turbine technician. Notably, growth in the wind-power field comes at the expense of similarly male-dominated jobs related to coal and other fossil fuels.

Women are gaining in many other fast-growing fields, including some that aren't stereotypically "women's work." While it's well known that a majority of physical therapists and nurses are women, it's probably more surprising to many that a majority of statisticians are female. And while most web developers and financial advisors (to pick two other fast-growing careers) are male, women comprise around a third of each of those fields. As women's gains in professional careers accelerate, competition for those jobs will increase, leaving fewer spots for marginally qualified men.

Women do better in the workforce in large part because they are better educated. They already make up 56% of undergraduates on college campuses, and they are significantly more likely to finish high school, earn better grades, make honor roll, and take more challenging classes than their male counterparts. Women earn the majority of doctoral degrees, make up 47% of medical schools' student bodies, and comprise 40% of those in top MBA programs. Although women currently earn only 18% of undergraduate computer- and information-sciences degrees, this rate is expected to double within the next few years. In short, as Christina Hoff Sommers and others have documented, there's a very good case to be made that it's boys—not girls—who are shortchanged in modern schools.

Women also are less likely than men to fall into major disqualifying categories for employment. Women under 50 are less likely to be unemployed because of a disability and are far, far less likely to have a criminal record. Indeed, 91% of all violent felons are male. Given the enormous consequences that any felony conviction has on one's ability to find jobs or—thanks to professional-licensing rules—to legally work at all in many fields, men's greater propensity for criminality constitutes an enormous barrier to work. Women also have higher average credit scores, which is a hiring consideration in some fields, particularly for mid-level and low-skill jobs.

Even the oft-discussed gender wage gap is rapidly closing. The Institute for Women's Policy Research projects that women's salaries will reach parity with men's by 2058, although there is a strong argument that women's dramatic increase in educational achievement could accelerate that timeline. The pay gap appears to stem partly from individual preferences related to work environment. Some of it likely is a result of social conditioning, because women are less likely to ask for raises than men and may be punished professionally and in terms of reputation when they do. But while there's little doubt that some women do face very real discrimination in the workforce, the gap is much narrower than the "77 cents on the dollar" figure popularized by the likes of Senator Bernie Sanders and former president Barack Obama. Controlling for experience, education, hours worked, and responsibility to care for children, women earn about 90% to 98% of men's wages when doing the same work for the same number of hours. The most detailed study—conducted by Consad Research Corporation for the U.S. Labor Department—concluded the difference is about 5%, after adjusting for all variables.

All of this does not mean, of course, that all men are failing or that everything is going right for women in the workplace. In the most prestigious, lucrative, and high-powered positions, men continue to dominate. Equity partners in major law firms are more than 80% male; Fortune 500 CEOs are more than 90% male; and athletes and full-time coaches in the four major professional sports leagues are 100% male. Men also receive about 80% of patents and start more than 60% of new businesses. Nearly all of the highest-paying college majors are male-dominated. There's no reason to think that a well-off, well-educated male (or even an average one) deserves pity as a "victim." He isn't one.

There are good reasons why policymakers should continue to devote resources to getting more women into science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) careers, and to creating more opportunities for female entrepreneurs. Indeed, a number of well-controlled and well-designed studies—one conducted by Columbia Business School in 2014 is particularly impressive—show real and persistent bias against women in the high-tech careers that are expected to produce great wealth in the future. Paying greater attention to the needs of lower-skilled men needn't and shouldn't distract from paying attention to women's needs in the workforce.

At the same time, however, the fact that some with XY chromosomes make up a disproportionate share of the country's highest earners does not help the male high-school dropout with a felony record and addiction problems who spends 35 hours a week playing video games. For lower-skilled men (and many lower-skilled women), the world of work is both daunting and increasingly foreign.

Whatever natural, biological advantages men once had, they are quickly eroding, even in areas where international competition and other factors haven't limited traditional working-class male jobs. Truck drivers are nearly 95% male, and driving a truck is the single most common overwhelmingly male profession. About 1.7 million Americans drive trucks today, and the profession is projected to grow quickly (although self-driving vehicles may change that). And, by definition, truck-driving jobs as they are currently understood could never be outsourced overseas. Nonetheless, the field's demographics are changing: The number of female truckers has more than doubled since 2000. While some of this no doubt stems from changing mores that allow more women to aspire to stereotypically male careers, this trend also involves technology and broader cultural trends.

Until the late 1960s, when power steering and braking became the norm, most women simply lacked the physical strength to drive a large truck. Combined with the physical dangers, a lack of private shower facilities at truck stops, and the difficulty of communicating with family on the road, these factors made it difficult for women to even think of entering the profession, even if they could find someone willing to hire them. Media accounts suggest female truckers continue to face serious challenges not experienced by their male colleagues, but there's nothing about modern trucking that makes women inherently less fit for the job.

Similar stories can be told in dozens of other lines of work. Quite simply, among careers with meaningful numbers of jobs or significant projected growth, there are none closed to women for biological reasons. The few that always will be—such as playing top-level professional football against men—are small niche occupations that very few of any sex could ever attain. This means that marginally skilled men face more competition and are likely to be left out of jobs they might once have pursued. And this will continue so long as women, on balance, are more educated and law-abiding.

For most Americans, particularly those with middle and lower levels of education and skills, the world of work continues to move further in the direction of women. As workforce participation drops, the problem is largely one that both directly affects and is caused by men.

#### MEN NOT AT WORK

As of August 2017, the U.S. unemployment rate stood at 4.4%—low, by historical standards. Commentators such as Nicholas Eberstadt, however, have suggested this figure can't be compared to numbers of the past, pointing to the overall decline in American workforce participation since 2000. While the overall decline is less of a problem than some alarmed analysts have suggested, declining workforce participation for men is concerning.

The workforce-participation rate for all adults in August 2017 (62.9%) is, indeed, lower than the averages for the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. But it's also higher than the 58.6% recorded in January 1955 or the overall January workforce participation for *any* year before 1978 for which we have data. Furthermore, workforce-participation rates have consistently been between 62% and 63% since 2014 when unemployment rates were much higher: Thus, recent declines in unemployment are *not* the result of people leaving the workforce. In any case, unless one believes the United States of the 1950s and 1960s was a hellscape of unengaged, lazy, and unemployed people barely scraping by, current workforce-participation rates aren't necessarily a huge problem by themselves. The problem, instead, is *men* being outside of the workforce. This is because men and women behave very differently when they are not formally employed. Quite simply, while women who are not in the workforce or leave it voluntarily tend to do socially positive things, men generally do not.

Women who have never been or are not currently in the workforce are often raising children, seeking education, volunteering in their communities, or are already retired. Most of the recent decline in workforce participation for women, as well as for men, can be attributed to retiring baby boomers. This demographic trend presents various problems for entitlement systems and pension plans, but it's probably good for the people in question, as well as for younger workers seeking job openings.

Indeed, until the late 20th century, the economically and socially vital work performed almost entirely by women—making clothing at home, preserving foodstuffs, cooking, and caring for children—was

almost always done outside of the formal workforce. The latter two activities are still performed disproportionately by women outside of the labor force and continue to produce tremendous value, even when they do not generate labor income. Likewise, seeking education beyond high school has become an increasingly female-dominated pursuit, as we discussed above.

Not only do men not work as much as they used to, but they also don't volunteer or join civic organizations. The U.S. Census Bureau consistently finds that women engage in community and volunteer activities at greater rates than men; nearly 30% of women volunteer regularly, while only a little more than 20% of men do. Much of the decline in civil society that Robert Putnam, Charles Murray, and others have documented is a decline in men's participation, which has correlated with a decline in workforce participation. At the turn of the 20th century, fraternal societies—the great majority of them male-only—were a key social glue in many communities and the source of nearly all life- and health-insurance coverage. Today, the handful of remaining societies write no health insurance and only about 2% of all life insurance. All-male clubs essentially no longer exist (the last major one, Augusta National Golf Club, went co-ed in 2012), and many have closed altogether.

Not only did men lose fellowship in these organizations, but they also lost the career networking and mentoring such groups offered. By contrast, women have built a multitude of professional organizations, from the Society of Women Engineers to the American Medical Women's Association. Women may have lost the sorority of the sewing circle, but their professional organizations more than compensate for that loss. Men haven't done the same. Indeed, we could find only one staffed professional association (the American Association for Men in Nursing) focused on men in a traditionally female profession.

Cultural changes have forced men to step up at home somewhat. Men who are married and some who are divorced play a greater role at home, especially with childrearing, than any other time in history. A 2015 analysis of census data conducted by the *Huffington Post* found that nearly 20% of stay-at-home parents were male; this was an increase from 1970, when six men in the entire country (six individuals, not 6%) described themselves as stay-at-home fathers. Moreover, most millennials (54% of whom value having a stay-at-home parent) say it doesn't matter whether a mother or father stays home, according to a Pew survey.



Nonetheless, enormous numbers of men do not support their children even financially because they do not work. While a full discussion of the costs and consequences of out-of-wedlock childbearing is beyond the scope of this essay, it's clear that this is a significant problem. And single mothers are about three-and-a-half times more numerous than single fathers. Since the decline in male work has *not* correlated with large drops in birth rates, it's an unavoidable conclusion that the social costs associated with children living outside of two-parent households are largely the responsibility of men who neither work nor support their children at home. Even among married couples, women still do the bulk of the childcare and housework. Men, though they are doing more than ever before at home, have not collectively filled the gap, even as they have left the workforce.

Many men are also frankly lazy. Research led by economist Erik Hurst of the University of Chicago shows that men without a college education, who make up the great bulk of the decline in male workforce participation, are replacing their work time almost entirely with leisure, particularly with playing video games. Among the cohorts Hurst and three colleagues studied in a working paper prepared for the National Bureau of Economic Research, men spent an average of 12 and sometimes upward of 30 hours a week playing video games. Although women like playing video games as much as men do (they make up 48% of the gaming community), they have not let it interrupt other areas of their lives. In an interview published by the Becker Friedman Institute of the University of Chicago, Hurst noted that the life satisfaction of such men is not particularly low relative to their peers. In their NBER paper, Hurst and his colleagues estimate that these activities make up between 38% and 79% of the difference in work effort between younger and older men. These younger men are, to put it simply, living off the labor of family members and transfer payments from taxpayers. Based on self-reported mood surveys, Hurst and his colleagues argue that increasingly immersive video games may actually be a cause, rather than the result, of disengagement from the workforce, civic life, and family.

Historically, men who don't work tend to turn to crime. Yet, interestingly, criminality has not increased in recent years: The decline in male workforce participation since 2007 has actually been accompanied by declines in crime (although violent crime has risen the past two years) and a relatively stable incarceration rate. For that matter, the significant



prison-infrastructure buildup and rising incarceration rates of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s correlated with relatively stable male workforce-participation rates. Men have always dominated the criminal world, and they currently make up 93% of those in federal prison and more than 80% of those in all correctional settings. But women are “gaining” on them in this area, as well, participating in drug-related financial transactions and other, white-collar crimes. Still, if there is a silver lining to be found in the rise of the full-time amateur gamer, it’s that he isn’t robbing banks.

Declining workforce-participation rates *per se* are not something about which to panic. Today’s total workforce-engagement rate is similar to the average for the entire period for which we have statistics. However, the decline in the number of working *men* has had serious and negative social consequences.

#### A NEW STRATEGY

Given the strong headwinds that men face in the job market, one obvious answer seems to be to develop public policies that simply get men to behave more like women in some key respects. That is, to encourage men, when they aren’t working, to devote themselves to childrearing, homemaking, and volunteerism, just as women do. Alas, no modern, developed society has figured out how to do this. If, as some argue, the differences between men’s and women’s social roles are not largely rooted in biology, they are so culturally ingrained that unprecedented social engineering would be required to reshape them. What we can do instead is encourage men to enter historically female-oriented careers, rework jobs in those fields to make them more suited to men, and remove barriers that keep low-skilled men out of the workforce.

Some of the burden of getting men into “women’s” careers will require cooperation from Hollywood movie studios, textbook publishers, magazine editors, and commercial publishing houses. Americans who do not see role models in the media, textbooks, and elsewhere simply will not have aspirations to enter those careers. Mary Tyler Moore’s character may be the first truly compelling example of a working woman, but she was followed by many other important characters. From Susan Dey’s character on *L.A. Law* in the 1980s to Laura Innes’s role as Dr. Weaver on *ER* in the 1990s and 2000s, women’s roles in traditionally male occupations were normalized on television. Real-life examples of

women breaking through both the front door and the glass ceiling also abound. How many millions of little girls inspired by astronaut Sally Ride in 1983 are leaders in previously male-dominated fields today? How many women bankers knew they could do it after Jacki Zehner was made partner at Goldman Sachs in 1996? Likewise, popular schoolbooks and other cultural touchstones could present more examples of men working in traditionally female professions. Certainly, such social normalization of men in these fields would be helpful.

Instead, however, current media portrayals tend to denigrate men in women's professions. The only portrayal of a male dental hygienist (a relatively well-paid, fast-growing job that's 98% female) that we could find in a mainstream movie of the last 10 years was in the film *Horrible Bosses*. That character, presented as something of a milquetoast, was both belittled and subjected to sexual harassment on the job from his female boss.

Television shows and movies about male teachers almost always cast men as high-school teachers, where men already have parity with women, and seldom as elementary-school teachers. Films like *Stand and Deliver* have cast male teachers as role models, but too many films portray male teachers as weak or slackers. From *Summer School* in the 1980s to 2017's *Fist Fight*, male teachers aren't given the respect they deserve, whereas female teachers are most often portrayed as conscientious and competent. Thus, while the media hasn't overtly opposed positive depictions of men in traditionally female careers, it has not been successful in delivering them. Casting a male nurse lead character on *Chicago Med* or producing a revival of *Welcome Back Kotter* in an elementary school could have a meaningful influence.

But media can only go so far, and such efforts are mostly beyond the direct influence of public policy. Policymakers instead need to focus on outreach to men. This does not mean affirmative action that lowers standards. Instead, we need to learn from the programs that reached out to draw women into traditionally "male" professions, and do much the same to bring men into female professions.

The Federal Women's Program, established by President Lyndon Johnson, has been successful in helping to boost the percentage of female government managers from the single digits in the 1960s to well over 30% today. A similar effort to attract males into nursing, other medical jobs, and teaching might well be justified. Both the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which

focuses on rural areas, have programs largely or entirely designed to attract women to STEM careers. Nearly every major public university maintains a program to attract women to science careers (many of them branded as “Women in Science and Engineering,” or WiSE). The national Girls Collaborative Program is a massive public-private effort to attract women to these careers.

Similar efforts for men do not currently exist in any meaningful fashion. There are no government or flagship state-university programs we could find that are focused on attracting men into stereotypically female careers, such as nursing and elementary-school teaching. Extensive internet searches and some phone calls turned up a single, limited, private effort to recruit men as a group to school teaching. Previous large-scale efforts worked to bring women into “men’s” careers; we should embark on new ones to bring men into “women’s” careers.

Discovering exactly *how* to attract men into female careers will require significant additional research. But it’s clear *when* we should do it—at key career inflection points for men. These would include high school and college, with a particular focus on teaching careers. It also would include reaching out to experienced workers in need of retraining for re-entry into the workforce or movement to a better job.

Outreach efforts for high-school students would begin with guidance counselors, who should be encouraged to market traditionally female careers to more males. In a study by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, male millennials reported that work/life balance is as important to them as it is to their female peers. Given that many male millennials also expect to share family responsibilities equally with their partners, flexible careers with extended time off, such as teaching and nursing, should appeal to them—or at least leave more time for playing video games.

Many traditionally female careers require fewer academic prerequisites. For example, certificates for physical-therapy assistants can usually be completed in five semesters at a community college. It’s possible to become a nurse with two years of training and, over time, acquire more education and on-the-job experience. After a dozen or so years of work and education, an individual with sufficient skills and intelligence can become a certified registered nurse anesthetist making as much as \$175,000 a year—roughly the same as a pediatrician.

These options could appeal to young men who don’t want to spend four years on a college campus, and they offer a smoother transition for

men living with their parents. Certainly, those careers require quite a bit of education, but the price of entry to the career track is low and may actually better suit men who have some aptitude but are below average in their high-school classes. This is the type of message that guidance counselors need to convey to young men but rarely do.

At the college level, outreach efforts should focus primarily on careers in education, particularly at the elementary-school level. Training public-school teachers was the original rationale for many state universities (many universities with names ending in “state” were originally called State Teachers’ colleges), and recruiting more men may have merit in the current educational environment. Millions of the nation’s elementary-school students are raised in homes without fathers, and male teachers could serve as important role models at the elementary-school level.

Such programs do already exist, but they are focused largely on men of color. For example, in 2015, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced New York City’s initiative to put an additional 1,000 male teachers of color into the city’s public schools over the next three years. Another program, Call Me MISTER (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models), has for over a decade provided tuition assistance and leadership training to male African-American students who pursue education degrees. Efforts also are underway to recruit and train more Hispanic male teachers, through programs such as the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. Latinos currently make up just 8% of public-school teachers, despite the public-school student body being almost one-quarter Latino. Certainly these programs should be supported and celebrated. But programs that recruit *all* men to teaching—including white and Asian men—are also needed.

Men must also be reached at career transition points for retraining into traditionally female occupations. This will require both a more inclusive environment for men in these training programs and a concerted effort to remove social stigma from men in these jobs. As traditionally male-dominated industries like coal mining die out, hard-working, physically strong men need to be retrained for careers that will persist through economic changes. This will require rooting out subtle and often unconscious signals that men are not welcome in those fields.

For example, the Mississippi University for Women has well-respected nursing and education programs and has admitted men for decades. But

continuing to include women in its name almost certainly scares some men away. Just as women may benefit from female teachers and mentors in male-dominated fields, men will likely need more male teachers and mentors available in female-dominated fields. Nursing and education schools should seek out male professors to create an inclusive academic environment, just as engineering schools make special efforts to recruit female engineers to teach. Males should also be sought as trainers “on the floor” in health-care positions to increase gender diversity in the workplace itself.

Finally, efforts to rethink jobs and redesign organizations should take into consideration men’s relatively greater physical strength, in the same way some jobs were redesigned to facilitate women’s entry into previously male occupations. In fields like nursing, having physically stronger individuals can both prevent worker injuries and improve patient care. Patients historically have been moved around hospitals by orderlies, who are overwhelmingly male and provide low-paid, unskilled labor. But as hospitals have cut costs by minimizing the number of orderlies per floor, nurses often end up doing this task. Given the rise in the weight of the average patient, nurses are suffering from back injuries at high rates: In one Northern Virginia medical system, they are the chief cause of occupational injuries overall. Male nurses would probably be better at this task, and it might be added to their formal job descriptions. This is not to suggest that male nurses should simply become highly paid orderlies, but rather that a nursing staff with more diverse skills could better serve patients—and that some jobs might be redesigned with efforts to attract more men in mind.

Physical strength is especially needed in at-home health care, where patients often must be moved without the aid of equipment. Physical strength also provides a pronounced advantage in psychiatric nursing, where patients frequently need to be restrained. Given the shortage of psychiatric nurses—notably, at Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals or in prisons—every effort should be made to tap more nurses who can serve this vulnerable patient population.

Currently, few policy proposals that would encourage men to enter historically female-dominated careers are ready to be deployed on a national scale. Funding to study job design, pilot programs in career recruitment, and experimental efforts by major university systems all would be welcome, particularly at the state and local levels.

NATIONAL REFORMS

At the national level, policies to encourage more men to go back to work are much closer to implementation. Lawmakers should pursue reforms to the criminal-justice system, occupational-licensing regime, and health-care and workplace benefits.

Getting more men into the workforce will require a more forgiving attitude toward criminality, particularly at younger ages. Men are simply more prone to serious violence and criminality than are women. Engaging more men in the workforce—particularly in an era of instant background checks—will require employers to exercise more forbearance and not automatically exclude applicants simply because of a criminal past. Private-sector employers—with very limited exceptions—should always be able to take recent or serious criminal records into account when making hiring decisions. But ample evidence shows that minor criminal records from some years ago, even violent ones, are often just youthful indiscretions.

More jurisdictions could at least entertain proposals like one currently under consideration in Connecticut that would raise the age of criminal responsibility over age 20. Few people commit serious violent crimes after their 30s. Ideally, laws should allow for less-serious criminal convictions to be considered “spent” after a period of good behavior outside the correctional system—similar to the approach currently in place in the United Kingdom. Where this isn’t possible, states could offer “certificates of rehabilitation,” which already exist in various forms in California, New York, Illinois, and several other states.

According to the Institute for Justice, about a third of U.S. jobs now require professional licenses and certifications. These serve as a barrier that disadvantages men relative to women. Men and women should be held to similarly high standards for all employment, but arbitrary educational or credential cutoffs increasingly hurt less-educated men; furthermore, employers should be able to decide what credentials matter or don’t matter. And, until we find a way to get men more interested in school, limiting mandatory credentials by the government would give school-averse men, who may be discouraged by the need for a license and the classwork needed to earn that license, the chance to acquire skills through on-the-job training. Moreover, many licensing regimes exclude felons or anyone with a criminal conviction from licensure. These

requirements need to be curtailed, leaving decisions about credentials to employers. While it's sensible to ban former drug dealers from working as pharmacists, there's no reason to think they shouldn't be able to become plumbers or realtors.

More states should also reconsider the use of credit scores as a factor in employment for jobs that do not require handling funds. According to a study by Robert Clifford and Daniel Shoag, banning credit as a basis for employment boosted the workforce in poor-credit areas by roughly 1.9% to 3.3%, relative to comparable areas without such bans. Interestingly, the gains were greater in higher-paying jobs. Those most positively affected included public-sector employers, as well as traditionally male industries like transportation, warehousing, and information technology. One predominantly female field—in-home services—also showed improvement; the in-home services industry is expected to grow significantly in the coming years. Barring men from entry to this field based on credit scores does not increase the quality of these services and may decrease the overall quality of care provided.

Just as there are government grants to encourage and support women in STEM fields—such as the USDA's Women and Minorities in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Fields Program—the federal government likewise should support men entering into fields like nursing. Funding for veterans to enter nursing careers and work in the Veterans Health Administration, for example, could both help to meet staffing shortages and bring more men into the nursing workforce. Just as the U.S. Labor Department finances a \$1.9 million grant competition to recruit, train, and retain women in high-skill occupations—such as advanced manufacturing, transportation, energy, construction, and information technology—similar funding and programs (perhaps starting with university systems) should encourage men to take up such fields as elementary education, physical therapy, dental hygiene, and nursing.

Another way to shape behavior is through systems of public and private benefits. Rather than manipulating these systems to encourage certain behaviors by either men or women, such systems should be as close to *neutral* as possible. How men might play a greater role in community organizations or at home is a matter best left to private decision-makers, not public ones. In the same vein, proposals like President Donald Trump's campaign-trail promise to provide paid mandated leave only for women ought to be rejected.



Reforms to the health-care system and other workplace benefits would also enable men and women to customize their benefits far more than current law allows. Workers have different health-care needs at different times in their careers, and costly mandated coverage could be especially harmful to those attempting to enter the workforce for the first time. Though none have passed so far, Republican proposals to allow states, rather than the federal government, to decide most health-benefit mandates would be a step in the right direction. The option *not* to purchase health insurance at all is probably most valuable to younger men just starting out in the workforce—though it would be perfectly appropriate to surcharge them later and perhaps require that they contribute financially to maternity costs for any children they father.

In short, there is currently a range of national laws and regulations that keep some men out of the workforce, rather than giving them a hand up. Changing these policies would help bring many back in.

#### RECOVERING DIGNITY

Male workforce disengagement is a major problem that has only gotten worse as many men have dropped out of not just the labor force, but life in general. This issue— not declining aggregate workforce participation or the male-female pay gap— is the most significant problem confronting the labor market in the United States.

Some of the problems modern American men face are beyond the reach of public policy to influence. There's no workable or feasible public policy that could encourage men to become more engaged in civil society or to form more organizations, for example. But deliberate public and private action could bring many men back into the fold of work. Community and family involvement, we can hope, will follow.

Bringing more men into the workforce will require a range of significant and ongoing policy changes that alter cultural messages about men's work, target men at key career inflection points, and modify public policies that have put barriers in men's way. Men, collectively, are not victims. In fact, they dominate the high-wage, high-skill, and high-prestige fields. But men with fewer skills are increasingly regarded as useless in modern society. With the right policies, however, they will go back to work, and recover a sense of dignity and purpose.