

Book Reviews

Men Without Work: America's Invisible Crisis.

Nicholas Eberstadt. 2016. Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press. ISBN: 978-1-59947-469-4. \$12.95 (paperback).

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Men Without Work: America's Invisible Crisis from Templeton Press is Nicholas Eberstadt's follow up to *A Nation of Takers: America's Entitlement Epidemic* from the same publisher in 2012. While the first book focused on the dramatic growth of federal entitlement spending over the past several decades, *Men Without Work* takes a decidedly less policy-oriented approach. While only a five-by-seven-inch book of just two hundred pages, in it, Eberstadt addresses the substantial decline in male labor-force participation over the past sixty years.

Starting quite ominously, Eberstadt's opening paragraph states:

Over the past two generations, American 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. (p. 3)

The primary theme here is that there has been a catastrophic decline in male labor force participation. The second is that it has happened so "quietly." In the next paragraph, he states, "There is perhaps no other instance in the modern American experience of a social change of such consequence receiving so little consideration" (p. 3). Bolstering this claim, he points to analysis of labor market conditions following the most recent recession. He shows that many articles paint a positive picture of job trends and low unemployment rates. This rosy view not only ignores, but potentially directly contradicts, easily observable deficiencies in U.S. labor markets. Men ages 25 to 54 that historically have the highest employment saw work rates fall from 94.1 percent in 1948 to 84.3 percent in 2015. Under what we report as "near-full employment," a monthly average of nearly one in six prime-age men neither had any

paying job nor was searching for work. He asks us to consider a single fact: that in 2015, the work rate 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 (p. 4).

Eberstadt's goals are to draw attention to this issue and to describe it thoroughly. For many readers, the decline in male labor force participation may come as a surprise. This phenomenon has been pointed out by economists for decades, however. Early identification of it can be seen in Robert Hall's 1970 *Why is the Unemployment Rate So High at Full Employment* or, more specifically, in T. Aldrich Finnegan's 1972 *Labor Force Growth and the Return to Full Employment* in which he commented on the "mysterious drop" of nearly one percent in the prime-age male labor force participation rate between 1965 and 1970. In 1980, Donald Parsons attempted to determine the causes of the doubling of the labor force non-participation rate among men ages 45 to 54 between 1948 and 1976. In the early 1990s, Chinhui Juhn and others (Juhn, 1992; Juhn, Murphy, Topel, Yellen, & Bailey, 1992) commented on the continuation of the trend and followed it up a decade later (Juhn, Murphy, & Topel, 2002) as the trend continued.

A more recent line of literature on labor force participation has emerged around the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009. Unemployment rose and labor force participation declined during this time. The recovery from the recession saw the unemployment rate recover but not labor force participation rates. Alan Krueger (2017), The Council of Economic Advisors (2016), and others (Austin, Glaeser, & Summers, 2018) have all written about this phenomenon with each identifying important elements. *Men Without Work* stands out among them as the most descriptive and comprehensive analysis of the issue as a long-term trend more than it does for unique contributions.

Eberstadt's objective in the book is to describe rather than explain the ongoing decline in male labor force participation in the United States. After introducing the topic, he spends three chapters systematically dissecting the data on the topic with the precision of a skilled surgeon. In this endeavor, he considers all of the explanations that one might offer. Demographics and trends in education and retirement have pinched the ends of the standard working career, but the decline in male labor force participation remains after these are accounted for. The dramatic increase in female labor force participation rates during

this period help explain why the exit of millions of male workers from employment did not create a crisis for employers trying to fill jobs, but there is no evidence that the female workers displaced the male workers. Changes in government benefits and policy have affected the trend, but none seem to be able to provide a substantive explanation according to the data.

Eberstadt also examines the trend from an international perspective. The trend of declining male labor force participation is a global one to be certain. The United States suffers from an “unwelcome American exceptionalism,” however. Male labor force participation rates rank second to the bottom among traditional OECD countries and demonstrate the greatest rate of decline. Interestingly, during this time, the United States alone has seen this occur while our labor hours per worker have remained essentially constant. In other words, the decline in hours worked by males exists across most developed nations, although most have seen these spread across both lower labor force participation rates and reduced hours for those who work. The United States, however, has seen it only in labor force participation rates, thus making the effect along this margin greater.

After completing the thorough description of the trend from historical and international perspectives, Eberstadt spends the fifth and sixth chapters comparing the individuals who are outside of the labor force with both the employed and the unemployed. Through pairwise comparisons rather than multivariate analysis, chapter five compares labor force participation rates across four dimensions: race/ethnicity, educational attainment, marital status, and nativity. To summarize, men ages 25 to 54 were more likely to be out of the labor force if they were African American, not an immigrant, were not married and did not have children with whom they resided, or had no more than a high school education.

With a clear view of the trend and some understanding of the demographic breakdown, chapter six provides a glimpse of how the men out of the labor force spend their time compared with those within. To most readers, I suspect it is a fairly depressing picture. Using labor market data, it is clear that the majority are not pursuing higher education or searching for work. Neither are they spending more time volunteering or in civic engagement. What is perhaps surprising to many, they are not staying home from work to care for children or others. Analysis of the American Time Use Survey provides insights into how the hours out of

the labor force are being used. While those out of the labor force spend more time in personal care, including sleeping, the greatest difference is found in leisure time spent in front of electronic screens. They spent five and a half hours a day in this endeavor, which is nearly three and a half hours more than for working men and two hours more than unemployed men. This is consistent with recent research by Aguilar et. al. (2017), who have similar findings and project that the trend may be growing. Finally, data from the 2004 General Social Survey show that 31% of those outside of the labor force report illegal drug use, compared to 22% for unemployed men and 8% for working men.

In chapters seven through nine, Eberstadt begins to look more like the rest of the existing economic literature on the subject by trying to determine the cause. In chapter seven, he lays out the same set of possible causal factors that has been used by others: supply, demand and institutional explanations (CEA, 2016). Much of the prior literature suggests a demand-side explanation. This is consistent with the fact that wages have not grown for low-skilled workers over this time which one would expect if it were a supply-side issue. As stated in CEA (2016), “Possible causes include technological advances and globalization, including import competition and offshoring...Some economists point to ‘skill-biased technological change’: advances that benefit workers with certain skill sets more than others...These forces have, among other things, eliminated large numbers of American manufacturing jobs over a number of decades...leaving many people--mostly men--unable to find new ones.”

While Eberstadt concedes the presence of declining demand for these workers and adds disappointing job growth as another factor leading to low demand, he is dissatisfied with declining demand as the sole explanatory factor. He points to several factors that he finds inconsistent with merely a demand-side explanation of the decline. First, the steadiness of the decline over decades, with little differentiation between times of recession and recovery, suggests something other than labor demand. Second, the dramatic differentiation between male and female trends is too stark. Third, labor demand for low-skill labor in general can't explain the substantial differences by nativity. Finally, differences in labor force participation by nativity and geographic area do not seem to be explainable by labor demand which should not fall clearly along these lines.

Given his diminution of the labor-demand theories, chapter eight looks at labor supply and the role of government benefits, with a

particular emphasis on Social Security Disability. Here, his findings are consistent with the literature. Disability payments are a significant and increasing source of support for men out of the labor force. It is not surprising that men out of the labor force are more likely to receive disability benefits than those who are working given the criteria for receiving benefits. The percentage of men out of the labor force receiving benefits has grown substantially over time, however. For example, 56.5% of men out of the labor force received disability benefits in 2013 compared to 38.3% in 1985. Looking at the timing of changes in benefits and the labor force participation trends, Eberstadt is quick to point out that the data do not support a direct causal factor from disability benefits to labor force separation. Instead, he suggests that men exiting the labor force for different reasons are finding disability benefits to be a source of income once they have left.

In chapter 9, which is arguably the greatest contribution of the entire book, Eberstadt turns to institutional factors behind the change, with a particular emphasis on the role of criminalization. Felony convictions, time spent in prison, and records of arrest all increase the likelihood that one is out of the labor force. Moreover, each of these trends correlate with the demographic characteristics of race and education in which we see lower levels of labor force participation. We have also seen a dramatic rise in each measure of criminalization over the same time period as the long-term trend in labor force participation. This leaves us with the question of whether criminalization and incarceration lead to lower labor force participation or if a third factor explains both. The case is certainly not strong enough to differentiate between these. Eberstadt does point out that incarceration rates have increased consistently year over year for the past several decades even after many measures of crime have declined, thus suggesting that our increased rate of criminalization may contribute to the problem, but much further research is necessary.

Chapter 10 deviates from the highly statistical preceding chapters of the book. In it, Eberstadt offers some modest proposals to help resolve the problem of declining male labor force participation. Only an eight-page chapter, this is not done in tremendous depth. Prior to proposing solutions, however, he attempts to make the case that it is a problem worth resolving, asserting that it is both a social and a political problem. From a social perspective, declining labor force participation can lead to a breakdown of family values and a loss of civic involvement and social

cohesion. From a political perspective, we return to Eberstadt's *A Nation of Takers*, it is further straining our welfare system. Whether it is the risk of bankrupting part of the system or a political backlash against the welfare system, this poses a risk to those who truly need these benefits.

With regard to solutions, only a tentative three-point outline is proposed. First, deregulation of the business climate may make new business formation easier which could increase the availability of jobs. This is consistent with the institutional and supply side causes that Eberstadt has argued within the book, and the fact that new business formation has declined in recent years may make this worth considering. Second, the welfare system in general, and the disability system in particular, may need to be reformed to decrease disincentives for work or even to include some "work first" requirements such as those introduced to the welfare system in the 1990s. Finally, work can be done to better integrate ex-criminals back into society following incarceration.

Chapters 11 and 12 provide responses to Eberstadt's work from economists Henry Olsen and Jared Bernstein. Both agree with most of his descriptive findings, although both take issue with how dismissive he is of the role declining labor demand plays in the story. Other standard metrics of labor force participation than those used by Eberstadt make this clearer. In chapter 13, Eberstadt responds to these criticisms largely by stating that he is simply trying to add other causal factors that have been neglected.

Men Without Work should be commended for both its breadth and depth. Hardly a reasonable hypothesis about the nature of America's declining male labor force participation escapes Eberstadt's thorough analysis. In spite of covering every square inch of the subject, the reader is left feeling empty. The book cast doubts on the ability of demand factors to explain the decline, but the supply and institutional factors it adds seem unable to provide more certainty. A reader likely concludes that supply, demand, and institutional factors all apply, but our understanding of each is insufficient to meaningfully address the issues. Certainly more can be done to isolate the unique contributions of each, but that is not to be found here.

The book also has a tendency to be unnecessarily complicated on many occasions. This is a complex subject and the data inherently become difficult to navigate at times. In spite of that, there are times where subtle but influential differences in labor market definitions are

made without a clear explanation as to why. Similarly, the choice of which groups to compare with regard to different variables does not always seem to have clarity as a key objective. For example, the sets of pairwise comparisons of chapter five can be dizzying to try to follow. Fairly simple multivariate analysis could have made the entire chapter far clearer. Finally, the response and counter-response chapters at the conclusion of the book seem entirely out of place. The reviews were obviously provided prior to the publication of the book. It would have been far better to acknowledge and respond to the criticisms in the primary text of the book rather than hash them out in additional chapters.

While the empirical analysis can be difficult to navigate for both necessary and unnecessary reasons, the book also introduces important normative concerns only to leave the reader feeling that there is much more to be said. The labor market trends that Eberstadt evaluates are not merely numbers; Eberstadt introduced the story to us as one that is catastrophic. By this, he does not merely refer to a picture of lost efficiency within our economy. Instead, he points to deep and fundamental shifts in the lives of millions of people. He rightly identifies that the consequences of it are profound; the new joblessness correlates with a decline in community participation and civic engagement and has a corrosive effect on work ethic. He further refers to a large scale “social emasculation.” With these concerns, he is merely scratching the surface of the broader implications.

Every person has a doctrine or set of beliefs about the role that work plays in our lives and society. Most of us believe that role to be greater than just material production and the provision of income to support the consumption of those goods. The reformed Christian tradition from which I come sees labor and vocation as being rooted in our being created in the image of God. We see foundations in how we view that labor in the Genesis narrative where we are called to tend to creation in ways that resemble the productive, creative, and relational God whose image we bear. We also see that all of creation belongs to God, and we are his stewards through all areas of our lives, including our work.

Men Without Work forces us to reconsider how we conceptualize the role of work in our lives. Perhaps it is necessary for the body of believers, guided by scripture, to revisit the concept of human flourishing in light of these trends. Regardless of the causes, millions of lives are changing, and our existing perspectives and work-life narrative may no longer fit. How does the changing role of work in people’s lives relate to our

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responsibility as stewards, members of households, our social relations, and our identity? These are profound questions. Arguably, a reevaluation is largely overdue given the changing work and family roles and expectations that women have faced over the past several decades. There are potential issues of justice and liberty manifesting themselves in these trends as well. It is one thing if the father in a family is choosing to stay home with children while his wife is the primary breadwinner. It is quite another if men, particularly along specific social and ethnic lines, desire work but are being systematically excluded from the workplace. A case may be made for substantial reform of our incarceration system and an expansion of the work that many churches pursue to assist ex-offenders as they seek to reenter society.

It is essential for us to be clear about the foundational narrative that we believe. Scripture provides us one about our individual and social roles and identities in God's timeless story. Andy Crouch (2017) has described work as "the fruitful transformation of the world through human effort and skill, in ways that serve our shared human needs and give glory to God." If that is the case, when labor markets change, we must reimagine what this looks like in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors. While Eberstadt is correct that there are reasons to be concerned over some of these trends, there is also room for optimism in a possibility to shed many of the consumeristic and financial-success driven attitudes that we have embraced, as well as how we have defined the labor market roles of both men and women. If men and women are designed to resemble our productive, creative, and relational creator, we must seek to build institutions that make that a possibility for as many people as possible, both within and outside of paid labor. As a church, we must also model identities rooted in this foundational narrative. That is a work to which we are all called.

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For elaboration of this point, see Nicholas Eberstadt, *A Nation of Takers: America's Entitlement Epidemic* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2012) as well as *Men without Work* : 21. Conard, *Upside* , 203 makes a similar point. Yes, Be Afraid, *Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2019, A17; and, on the call of the "young Dutch historian" Rutger Bregman, whose most recent book has already been translated into 32 languages and whose program calls for "taxes, taxes, taxes," all for the sake of "a 15-h working week, a world without borders, and a basic salary for every citizen," Patrick. Kingsley, "Ruffling Feathers in a Global Conversation on Income," *New York Times*, March 2, 2019, A9. In "Men Without Work", Nicholas Eberstadt roundly documents the ever increasing number of men who have elected to disengage from the American workforce. In this regard he has made "America's Invisible Crisis" less invisible. This is an important starting point and it being his primary aim in this thin volume, he is successful. Beyond documenting the problem, Eberstadt makes a number of plausible hypotheses as to why labor force participation has plummeted among American men but with less clear d In "Men Without Work", Nicholas Eberstadt roundly documents the ever increasing number of men who h Nick Eberstadt illustrates the magnitude of the decrease, proposes mostly supply-side explanations, and extends a research agenda into this vital policy issue. To annotate the abstract at the left please login. To filter out some types of linkages click on its name in tables at the left. Press Ctrl and click for multi-selection or unselect. {0}. x.