Why So Many Prime-Age Men Opt Out of the Work Force

Men Without Work: Post-Pandemic Edition, by Nicholas Eberstadt (Templeton Press, 2022)

Reviewed by Christopher Holder

This book aims to explain two seemingly contradictory realities: at a time when employment and job growth are unusually strong, a growing share of American men are acting as if they are trapped in a severe recession.

Author Nicholas Eberstadt delves deep into an often-overlooked issue plaguing the American workforce. Educated at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, he first investigated this in his 2016 edition of the book. Now he offers a post-pandemic update on what he deems America's "invisible crisis." He describes this as the steady decline in workforce participation among prime-age men over the past half-century. Their flight from the labor market, Eberstadt claims, has remained too-little noticed, despite its profound societal and political implications.

His journey to uncover this crisis led Eberstadt to pull on a thread that unraveled a complex web of socio-economic challenges affecting the United States. Eberstadt's credentials are robust, with a Harvard PhD. and a career dedicated to analyzing controversial economic and social issues. Recent publications by the author, like his previous book Nation of Takers, have gained significant traction, particularly in conservative circles. Given his background and knowledge in economics, the book offers a data-driven analysis of the issue, underpinned by thorough research and compelling narratives. Despite the controversial nature of focusing on a gender-specific issue, he argues that the collapse of work among men aged 25 to 54 is a pressing concern that demands attention.

This provides the book with a clear purpose, shedding light on an urgent problem, challenging prevailing narratives, and stimulating meaningful discussions that could lead to meaningful policy changes. Eberstadt's central hypothesis seems aimed at providing a balanced answer to the issue at hand. Of course, often the more passionate an author is about his subject, the more likely some biases may turn up. However, the book maintains an objective approach by relying on data from widely recognized sources.

The intended audience for this book is broad, encouraging anyone in the general public interested in understanding the complexities of the American workforce to read. The book is relevant not only to the future of the American work force, but also to issues like unemployment, income inequality, and social welfare. Additionally, the book is structured in a way that makes it easy for readers who are not academics or familiar with these topics. It begins by laying out the historical context and evolution of the problem, followed by an in-depth analysis of its causes and consequences.

The crux of what Eberstadt argues is that the ongoing decline in the male labor participation rate is not a demand-driven trend. Before the first release of his book in 2016, the mainstream thinking in the academic and political sphere was dominated by a singular narrative that believed this arose from a demand-sided issue in the labor market. This stemmed from less demand for low-skilled work due to the decline of manufacturing, outsourcing overseas, and the globalization of trade. However, he illustrates that this doesn't explain much of what is being seen. In conventional economic wisdom, if this were a demand-sided phenomenon, the labor market would seek equilibrium. But the proportion of American men with no paid work has risen relentlessly. This has snowballed into a situation where the proportion of men without paid work is now only slightly higher than in 1940s, at the end of the Great Depression.

Eberstadt continues to defend and support this claim through numerous studies by independent researchers and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The evidence proves compelling, as he relies on a neutral data-driven analysis. There are numerous graphs demonstrating the current rate of men without paid work is higher than during the Great Depression, with one in seven men between the ages of 25 and 54 not working.

The book delves into the shift from unemployment to a new category of men who are neither working nor looking for work. This retreat from the workforce by prime-aged men has shown an almost straight-line increase since 1965, indicating a consistent trend rather than a response to economic fluctuations or globalization. Eberstadt goes on to hypothesize why this phenomenon is occurring, what activities these men are engaging in instead of working, and how they sustain themselves financially despite their lack of employment.

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Eberstadt's second edition of the book Men Without Work: Post Pandemic added a new dimension to America's work crisis with a labor scarcity across all regions and lines of work. Despite a severe drop-off in the workforce numbers, there's been a surge in job openings, exacerbating the labor shortage issue. Eberstadt challenges the prevailing wisdom that the decline in labor force participation is solely due to economic and structural changes, arguing that this narrative doesn't fully explain the persistent trend. Furthermore, the book discusses the impact of government responses to the pandemic, such as monetary and fiscal policies, which may have inadvertently disincentivized work. Policies like pandemic unemployment benefits and stimulus checks increased disposable income and savings, potentially reducing the urgency to return to work.

Eberstadt, a senior fellow at a right-leaning think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, has an approach and conclusions of a more conservative tilt, emphasizing individual responsibility and critiquing government interventions that may disincentivize work. This helps explain his skepticism towards popular policies like unemployment benefits.

While agreeing with parts of Eberstadt's analysis, some fellow economists on the other side of the political aisle have disagreed with his favored solutions to help this problem. Most notably, Lawrence Summers, former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, current Harvard Professor and advisor to Democratic candidates, argues against attributing the phenomenon of nonworking men primarily to an increasingly generous welfare state. He points out that while there have been increases in the number of people on disability insurance and changes in government support programs, this alone does not explain the situation. Instead, he proposes that the answers lie more in sociology than economics, indicating a collective change in attitude among the population, possibly influenced by benefits, generosity, and structural changes in opportunities. He discusses the intertwined relationship between marriage rates and desire to work, highlighting the difficulty in determining causality. Summers emphasizes the importance of prioritizing education for boys and improving the transition from school to work, criticizing the influence of intellectual elites on educational experiences and the emphasis on self-esteem over achievement. He suggests that addressing these issues is crucial for tackling broader societal challenges.

Eberstadt provides a compelling narrative transcending mainstream explanations, enriching the understanding of this pressing economic and societal issue. However, while the economic factors are extensively discussed, there could be more research and exploration into the societal and psychological factors contributing to this trend, as Summer argues. Eberstadt relies heavily on statistical data, graphs, and time-use surveys to support his arguments, making the case more compelling. But, while the economic factors are well-addressed, the book could delve deeper into the societal implications of this crisis by seeking answers to such questions as: What drives men are out of the workforce to begin with? What are the long-term consequences for families, communities, and society? Additionally, there is much room to explore the sociocultural shift in the last century that could contribute to this phenomenon and see how these men's mental health and well-being could offer a more holistic understanding of the issue.

In conclusion, Nick Eberstadt's book, Men Without Work: Post-Pandemic Edition, comprehensively explores a deeply entrenched societal issue that has largely gone unnoticed—the decline in workforce participation among prime-age men in the United States over the past half-century. Eberstadt's journey to unravel this crisis began with the perplexing dichotomy between record-low unemployment rates and widespread belief in an ongoing recession among Americans. Eberstadt presents a data-driven analysis of the issue, challenging prevailing narratives and stimulating meaningful discussions. Despite the controversial nature of focusing on a gender-specific issue, the author provides a compelling narrative that transcends mainstream explanations, enriching our understanding of this pressing societal issue and advocating for meaningful policy changes. However, further research into the societal and psychological factors contributing to the crisis and its long-term consequences could offer a more comprehensive understanding and guide future efforts to address the issue effectively.

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