

ARE AMERICAN MEN COMMITTED TO WORK AND FAMILY?

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Among persons 16 years or older, an estimated 38.6 million men and 57.1 million women on average did not work or look for work in any given month in 2018. Many of them were attending school or enrolled in a training program, caring for children or other dependent family members, recuperating from an illness, retired following a lifetime of working, or just stopped looking for work because they were discouraged about ever finding work again.

The work ethic for men has been weakening for more than 40 years. In 1979, labor force participation for men stood at 77.8 percent. In 2019 it had fallen to 69.2 percent. For women, however, it has risen from 50.9 percent to 57.4 percent. All of the information reported here derive from the most recently available pre-pandemic data from the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Men and women alike work for three principal reasons. To earn enough to support themselves and their dependents; to develop their skills and talents in order to get ahead; to experience the feeling of belonging in a workplace where they are valued as friends and colleagues. The second reason expresses their individuality as human beings. The third reflects their human sociality. The first pertains to both their individuality and sociality.

No two human beings are alike. Men may weight these three reasons differently than women. Women who are mothers may prioritize them differently than women who are not. Men who are married may find a different balance across the three than men who are not. The significance that men and women assign to these three reasons for working plays an important role in determining their labor force attachment.

Setting aside the usual reasons for not working or looking work, we still must question why so many men are neither working nor looking for work. Doesn't American culture expect men in the prime of life to work if only to not become a burden to others who do work? Our interest in the following focuses on men 25 to 54 years of age. In other words, men in their prime working years. The data reported herein on MSP men refers to men who are married to an opposite-sex partner. *Effective January 2020, the BLS includes men who are married to a same-sex partner as MSP men.*

Marriage and the presence of children matter importantly to prime-age working men. Among men 25-54 years of age and older who were married spouse present (MSP), 82.8 percent or 27.7 million worked year round, full time in 2017. The year-round full-time work ethic is even higher – 84.4 percent – for MSP men with at least one child. In sharp contrast, among never-married (NM) men only 62.3 percent or 13.1million worked year round, full time. See Table 1. Of the 62.9 million men in the 25-54 year old population, an estimated 7.4 million did not work at all in 2017. More than 50 percent of the year-long non-workers were NM men. The proportion of who did not work at all in 2017 was roughly two and one-half times higher for NM men (18.0 percent) than MSP men (6.8 percent).

Embedded in the marriage bond is a commitment to work that MSP men by and large still honor, especially when they have children. In 2018 the participation rate for 25-54 MSP men with at least one child was 92.6 percent. With their different expectations and responsibilities NM men

have different labor force attachments. For them, whether they have children or not, the participation rate was fully 10 percentage points lower. See Table 2.

Among 25-54 year olds, the number of NM men increased by 3.0 million between 2012 and 2018 while the number of MSP men decreased by 919 thousand. It follows that the increase in the number of 25-54 year old NM men is one significant factor accounting for the decline in the participation rate for all men in that age group.

Disability is another. Among all NM men 13.6 percent reported some disability in 2018. It was much lower – 6.9 percent – for MSP men. Focusing on the men who did not work at all in 2017, roughly one half of them, whether they were MSP men or NM men, reported they had some type of work disability. Looking at the other end of the work-experience spectrum -- men who worked year round, full time – the incidence of self-reported work disability was nearly four times higher for men who were never married than for their married counterparts.

We focused attention on men between 25 and 54 years of age because, given strong cultural norms regarding the importance of work to prime working-age men, we expected to find that participation among them would be higher than for any younger or older men. And it is, especially for MSP men with at least one child where in any given month in 2018 more than 9 out of 10 were working or looking for work. Further, in 2017 almost 85 percent of these married fathers worked year round, full time, very few of whom reported having a work disability.

TABLE 1
Worked Year Round, Full Time in 2017: Percent
Men 25 – 54 Years of Age

Married Spouse Present (n=27,740,000) ...	Never Married (n=13,145,000)...
with one child or more < 18 -- 84.4 percent	with one child or more <18 -- 62.6 percent
with no children <18 --79.6 percent	with no children <18 -- 60.3 percent

(these data are collected once a year and cover all 52 weeks in the previous year)

Source: <https://www.census.gov/cps/data/cpstablecreator.html>

TABLE 2
Labor Force Participation Rate in 2018: Percent
Men 25 – 54 Years of Age

Married Spouse Present (n=33,499,000) ...	Never Married (n=21,114,000)...
with one child or more < 18 -- 92.6 percent	with one child or more <18 -- 81.0 percent
with no children <18 -- 89.1 percent	with no children <18 -- 83.1 percent

(these data are annual averages constructed from the 12 monthly labor force reports)

Source: <https://www.census.gov/cps/data/cpstablecreator.html>

For married men, especially those with children under age 18, work and family still matter. However, their numbers have fallen by more than 900,000 since 2012 while the numbers of never married men have risen by 3 million over the same period. As long as this trend continues, where increasing numbers of men in their prime working years do not commit to marriage, labor force participation for all men 16 years of age or older will continue to erode. Even more important, for men 25 to 54 years of age the shift from marriage to cohabitation portends a weaker commitment of the cohabitating partners to one another and to the security and development of any children born of that relationship because either partner can pick up and leave at any time. Commitment matters.