

## ECONOMIC SCENE

# A growing number of men are not working, so what are they doing?

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A growing number of men in their prime working years are pursuing what might be called the Kramer lifestyle, after the enigmatic "Seinfeld" character: neither working nor attending school. In 1967, 2.2 percent of noninstitutionalized men age 25 to 54 spent the entire year without working for pay or attending school. That figure climbed to 8 percent in 2002, the latest year available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

This trend is partly related to the rising disability rolls. More than half of male nonworkers reported themselves as sick or disabled. But the number of long-term jobless men who were able-bodied -- a diverse group including young retirees, men who cannot find work, and family care providers -- grew at a faster rate than the number who were disabled over the last 35 years.

The problem is much more severe for some groups than others. Nearly one in five men age 25 to 54 with less than a high school degree did not work even one week in 2002. The nonworking rate for college graduates was only 3.3 percent. In central cities, 10.8 percent of men spent the year without work, compared with 7.1 percent elsewhere.

Joblessness is persistent over time, so it ends up being highly concentrated among a small cadre of men who frequently spend long stretches without work. Just 3 percent of men accounted for more than two-thirds of the total number of years that men spent not working in the period from 1987 to 1997, according to an analysis by Jay Stewart, an economist at the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Long-term joblessness among mature men has become a much more important phenomenon than unemployment. Many jobless men do not actively search for work, so they are not counted as unemployed. Yet they still represent a significant loss of productive human resources for the economy.

The conventional wisdom is that joblessness has grown since the early 1980's because the demand for less-skilled workers has dropped, causing their pay to fall. The decline in unions and erosion of the real value of the minimum wage have also caused their pay to fall. Rather than toil at low pay, more and more men have withdrawn from the job market.

How are these men spending their time and getting by?

A new working paper by Mr. Stewart of the Labor Bureau provides the most comprehensive answers to date. The study, "What Do Male Nonworkers Do?" (available online from [www.bls.gov/search/ore.asp](http://www.bls.gov/search/ore.asp)), draws on information from several national data sets on the time allocation, living arrangements and income sources of male nonworkers in their prime earning years.

To see how workers and nonworkers allocate their time, Mr. Stewart analyzed a time-use survey from the University of Maryland, which includes detailed information on respondents' activities on a randomly selected day between 1992 and 1994. Unfortunately, the survey does not allow one to distinguish between the long-term jobless and the temporarily unemployed, so the sample includes some men who worked part of the year. Nevertheless, because nearly half the nonworking men age 25 to 54 reported themselves as disabled or retired, many long-term nonworkers are

included.

In short, the average day of a male nonworker looks very much like the average day of a worker -- on his day off. Nonworkers devoted 8.4 hours a day to leisure and recreation and 3.3 hours to housework. On their days off, workers devoted almost the same amount of time -- 8 and 3.4 hours, respectively -- to these activities.

On workdays, the average full-time worker devoted only 3.5 hours to leisure and recreation and one hour to housework. Men worked an average of 8.6 hours on days when they performed some work for pay.

Comparing workers and nonworkers over a full week, nonworkers spent about a quarter of their extra time in "home production," which includes household chores, cleaning and repairs. The bulk of their extra time went into leisure and recreation, particularly watching television, socializing and playing sports and games. Nonworkers also slept 10 percent more (44 minutes) a night than workers. Both groups devoted relatively little time to child care, at least as a primary activity.

By contrast, nonworking women spend half their extra time engaged in household work and child care.

Supporting a Kramer lifestyle is not easy, especially if your neighbors are less magnanimous than Jerry Seinfeld. Nearly two-thirds of nonworking men age 25 to 54 received income from some source in 2002. Among those with unearned income, the average amount was \$11,551, with the largest sums coming from Social Security and disability payments.

The income sources varied with the reason for not working. In the 1990's, the sick and disabled received 53 percent of their income from Social Security and 25 percent from workers' compensation insurance and private disability payments; the retired received 52 percent from retirement income and 19 percent from assets; and those who said they were unable to find work received 38 percent of their income from unemployment compensation. The retired had the highest amount of unearned income, while men engaged in family care or unable to find work had the lowest.

Not surprisingly, wives are also an important source of financial support for nonworking men, but only 42 percent of male nonworkers between age 25 and 54 are married, compared with 68 percent of their employed counterparts. Twenty-nine percent of nonworkers live with their parents or other relatives, substantially higher than the 9 percent of workers in such a living arrangement. More than 40 percent of nonworkers who live with their spouse or parents also have other relatives present who contribute income to their household. Thus, financial support for nonworkers seems to be a family affair.

The experiences of nonworking adult men are quite varied, and many have severe disabilities. Although these statistics paint a picture of nonworking men struggling to get by financially, many manage to live as if every day were Sunday. As one man from Brooklyn who has not worked since 1998 told me this week, he thinks of the Off-Track Betting parlor in Midtown Manhattan as his "club," and he sees many of the same men there day after day.