Missing Men? Precarity and Declining Labor Force Participation Among Working-Class Men

Robert Francis, Whitworth University

Abstract

Recent research has noted declining labor force participation among working class men in the United States, but with little attention to the mechanisms underlying such withdrawal. In this article—drawing on in-depth interviews with 61 working-class men from rural Pennsylvania—I address this gap in the literature by prodding respondents on the sequential character of their employment experiences, their perceived vulnerabilities, and the calculations they make in the contexts in which they live. Findings reveal fluctuations in their engagement with work, something I refer to as *participation churn*. However, respondents' labor force narratives also show how they adapt to local employment conditions and personal circumstances, a phenomenon referred to as *adaptive nonparticipation*. The results highlight key mechanisms underlying labor force dropout and have implications for how declining labor force participation should be understood. These findings advance the sociological understanding of how workers—even in precarious positions—assert agency.

Keywords

Working class, employment, nonwork, precarity

The American labor force participation rate[1]—the percentage of the working-age population working or actively seeking work—has been marked by two dominant trends since the 1950s: a dramatic increase in labor force participation among women, especially since the 1970s, and a steady decline in labor force participation among men (Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). Within these trends, a phenomenon that has attracted a particular attention is the decline in labor force participation among prime-age men (ages 25-54), especially prime-age men with less formal education (Eberstadt, 2016; Tüzemen, 2018; Ziliak, 2018). In 2016, 7.1 million prime-age men did not participate in the labor force, up from 4.6 million men twenty years earlier (Tüzemen, 2018). Additionally, most of these cases of nonparticipation last one year or longer. For example, almost one-quarter of men between the ages of 21 and 30 without a four-year college degree reported not working at all during 2015, up from just nine percent in 2000 (Aguiar et al., 2017). Why are so many prime-age men 'vanishing' from the labor force (Tüzemen, 2018, p.5)?

Explorations of this phenomenon, mostly by labor economists, tend to favor either supply-side or demand-side explanations.[2] Supply-side explanations for nonwork argue that men have largely chosen to leave the labor force voluntarily, enticed by a combination of government benefits, financial and housing support

[1] The civilian non-institutional labor force participation rate (LFPR), which is captured in the Current Population Survey (CPS) and reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), is the percentage of the population age 16 and older who are not in prison, the active-duty military or other institutions (e.g. mental health facilities) and who are either currently employed or unemployed but actively seeking work.

[2] For reviews of the evidence around declining labor force participation rate among prime-age men, see Abraham and Kearney (2020); Black et al. (2016); Council of Economic Advisors (2016); Eberstadt (2016); and Tüzemen (2018).

from family and household members, and the allure of video games and other leisure activities. Demand-side explanations emphasize the roles of structural changes to the economy, such as reduced demand for less-skilled labor, stagnant wages, globalization, and mismatches between the employment expectations of low-skilled men and the types of jobs that are available at their skill and educational levels. While economics has identified certain aggregate patterns, a sociological view is also interested in the mechanisms underlying these trends (Gross, 2009; Reskin, 2003).

Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 61 working-class men from rural Pennsylvania, this article brings a sociological lens to the 'economic mystery' (Noguchi, 2016, p. 1) of declining labor force participation among less-educated, prime-age men. The picture of labor force participation that emerges from the men in this study is more fluid—and men's labor force decisions more adaptive—than previous work suggests. This article offers two main findings. First, there is evidence that *most* workers over the long run experience periods of labor force nonparticipation, including periods lasting one year or more, a phenomenon I label as *participation churn*. Empirically, this suggests that a full accounting of declining labor force participation must consider the movement of men in and out of the labor force over time, including men who leave for extended periods but later return. Sociologically, this finding challenges the idea that the labor force is composed of two empirically and qualitatively distinct types of men: those who work and those who don't. The fact that most workers experience labor force dropout at some point suggests that labor force nonparticipation is a feature—not a bug—of the twenty-first century labor market, a finding likely to be accentuated in the post-COVID-19 employment landscape.

Second, by using in-depth interviews to set men's labor force decisions in the contexts of their lives, families, and communities, the main reasons men leave the labor force are *adaptive*. I suggest the phrase *adaptive nonparticipation* to capture the ways in which men leave the labor force for reasons that make sense in context and rarely represent disinterest in or detachment from work. Adaptive nonparticipation offers a theoretical advancement in the sociology of work subfield of *employment management work* (EMW), the term for the process by which workers 'manage their employment experiences' (Halpin and Smith, 2017, p. 340). Adaptive nonparticipation expands the scope of EMW to include the ways in which even the choice of nonwork itself is a way in which disadvantaged workers assert agency in the management of their employment.

Declining Labor Force Participation Among Prime-Age Men

Explanations for the decline in labor force participation among less-educated, prime-age men tend to emphasize either supply or demand. Supply-side arguments suggest that men have been enticed to withdraw their labor supply by a combination of government benefits, support from others, and the allure of video games and other leisure activities. For example, there is evidence that Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits, income from household members, and unearned income are important in supporting nonworking, prime-age men (Council of Economic Advisors, 2016; Eberstadt, 2016; Stewart, 2006). Supply-side proponents also point to the fact that there has been a decrease in nonparticipating men who report wanting a job over time (Council of Economic Advisors, 2016). Further, the biggest divergence of time use between nonparticipating men and their participating peers is in leisure, particularly video games, leading some to argue that nonparticipating men have been enticed from the labor market by gaming and recreational computer use (Aguiar et al., 2017; Hurst, 2016).

Demand-side explanations emphasize reductions in the demand for low-skilled labor and the low return for work for those at the bottom of the wage distribution. Research shows that skill-biased technological change (Autor et al., 2008; Goldin & Katz, 1998) depresses wages for occupations that require manual or routine labor, which hits less-educated, prime-age men particularly hard. Previous studies have linked declining labor market opportunities for low-skilled workers and stagnant real wage growth as the most likely driver in the 1970s and 1980s (Juhn et al., 1991; Juhn & Potter, 2006), and then decreased demand for middle-skill jobs in the 1990s (Aaronson et al., 2014). Numerous studies – both quantitative and qualitative – have described dismal job prospects for low- and middle-skill workers in today's economy, including low wages, few opportunities for wage growth or advancement, few benefits, and low job security (Autor & Dorn, 2009; Chen, 2015; Kalleberg, 2009, 2011; Newman, 2009; Silva, 2013).

Fitting Nonwork within Employment Management Work (EMW)

In 2017, sociologists Halpin and Smith (2017) introduced *employment management work* (EMW) as a theoretical framework to capture the real-world calculations and trade-offs made by workers—from white-collar managers to migrant workers—as they navigate the labor market and engage with the economy. EMW as theorized by Halpin and Smith (2017) has four components that cut across occupations and social classes: 1) people calculate their use of time in relation to their income streams; 2) work is relational and mediated by others (e.g., networks, organizations); 3) workers know the importance of acquiring human capital; and 4) workers plan for future prospects. EMW operates for all employment types, although the focus of this article is on relatively disadvantaged workers, namely working-class men. As Halpin and Smith argue, there is robust evidence about the ways in which low-wage workers, despite their labor market disadvantages, are agents of their own employment, including through the use of 'folk knowledge' (Newman, 2006); the continual calculation and maximization of paid obligations (Edin & Kefalas, 2007); and making lateral moves among low-wage jobs to maximize dignity (Newman, 2006; Smith, 2002; Williams, 2006). In Halpin and Smith's own research among immigrants in low-wage work, they find the use of several employment management strategies that enable these workers to 'control and improve' (2017, p.349) the terms of their employment.

The phenomenon of declining labor force participation introduces a potentially confounding behavior into EMW, namely the decision to withdraw from the labor force. There is an extensive literature about the fact that women are more likely than men to withdraw from the labor force when faced with parenting and caregiving duties (Damaske, 2011; Dill & Frech, 2019; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000), a phenomenon exponentially accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, less sociological attention has been paid to the reasons why prime-age men withdraw from work, a behavior that cuts against the gendered expectations that men's labor market position in a household is primary. Nonwork is potentially confounding to the EMW framework because of EMW's focus on the ways that workers, especially low-wage workers, seek to work as many hours as possible, often juggling multiple jobs and income streams. Within the EMW framework—and within the sociology of work more broadly—what are we to make of workers who withdraw their labor?

Data and Methods

Data for this article come from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 61 working-class men in rural Pennsylvania conducted between July 2016 and May 2018. The three screening criteria for inclusion in the sample were 1) men; 2) relatively young, generally under 40 years old; and 3) working class, loosely

defined as having less than a four-year college degree, working in a blue-collar occupation, or both. Men were recruited through a mixture of snowball sampling and venue-based recruitment. When recruiting, I most often said I was looking for younger men who were not working or had trouble finding work, but I did not exclude men who were working at the time of the interview to guard against sampling on the dependent variable, namely nonwork. As part of recruitment, I talked with local business owners, nonprofit executives, chambers of commerce, pastors, and educators. I also spent time in bars, restaurants, coffee shops, and businesses, all with an eye for possible study participants.

Once respondents were identified and successfully recruited for the study, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with each respondent using narrative interviewing (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). I began each interview with the invitation for the man to tell me the story of his life. From there, participants were asked about their life histories, including origins, education, employment, relationships and current situation. Special attention was given to participants' employment histories, including job duties, duration, hours, wages and benefits, coworkers and supervisors, reasons for leaving, views toward work and the labor market, and current work status and means of support. Interviews took place in a variety of places: homes, apartments, front yards, back yards, offices, coffee shops, restaurants, and even a police station. Men came from a total of 17 different small towns across a five-county area of northwestern Pennsylvania, a relatively rural region of a state with a history of lumber, oil, and natural gas extraction; steel production and manufacturing; and limited agriculture. Interviews were digitally recorded, and I took field notes about the setting and substance of each interview as soon as possible after the interview was completed. Respondents were offered a $25 stipend for their time, although in some cases, men declined the payment.

The recorded interviews were transcribed, assigned a case number and pseudonym, and uploaded into NVivo 12 Plus, a software program for analysis of qualitative data. Following the 'flexible coding' protocol detailed by Deterding and Waters (2018), I began analysis by creating a set of index codes, which are broad categories based upon the topics covered in the interview protocol. Concurrent with index coding, I populated a spreadsheet with what Deterding and Waters (2018) call attributive codes, which are categorical or numeric data connected to each case, such as number of biological children, highest educational attainment and current hourly wage. Also concurrent with the index coding, I took notes on each case, which formed the basis for a respondent memo associated with each case. These four documents—interview transcript, respondent memo, interview field notes, and spreadsheet of attributive codes—make up the core data for each case.

Analysis and Findings

The demographics of the cases are displayed in Table 1. The average age of the participants is 35. All participants are men and virtually all are White, which reflects the racial demographics of the study site, which is 95 percent White. The modal highest educational attainment is a high school diploma or GED, although a plurality of the men attempted or completed some type of post-secondary education or training. About three-quarters of the men had a job at the time of the interview, with another 10 percent unemployed but looking for work. Ten men were not in the labor force. The men work in a wide range of sectors, including construction, manufacturing, retail, health care, resource extraction and law enforcement.

Table 1. Demographics of Cases

Respondent Characteristics	Total (N = 61)	Percent of Cases[a]
Mean Respondent Age	35	N/A
Gender		
Male	61	100
Female	0	0
Race		
White	58	95
American Indian	2	3
Asian American	1	2
Highest Educational Attainment		
Less than high school	1	2
High school diploma or equivalent (e.g. GED)	20	33
Completed post-secondary credential (e.g. CDL)	11	18
Some college, no degree	15	25
Associate degree	7	11
Bachelor's degree	7	11
Work Status (at time of interview)		
Full-time	35	57
Part-time	11	18
Unemployed	5	8
Not in labor force (NILF)	10	16

[a] May not total to 100 due to rounding

Participation Churn

Because this study is concerned with labor force nonparticipation as defined by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the first task was to use the BLS framework for identifying periods of work and nonwork in the labor force histories of each respondent. The BLS has a detailed protocol for determining the labor force status of each participating household.[3] For that reason, a key feature of the interview protocol in this study was a thorough questioning of the respondent's full work history with probes for periods of unemployment or nonwork. Based upon the respondent's lifetime labor force history as captured in the interview, I determined for each case if there would have been any time when the respondent was outside the labor force had they been surveyed by the BLS in a given month.[4] Using this process, I sorted the 61

[3] For more on how the BLS measures unemployment and labor force participation, see https://www.bls.gov/cps/cps_htgm.htm.

[4] In most cases, determining the respondent's labor force status at a given time is unambiguous: if they were working full- or part-time, they were employed. If they did not have a job but were actively looking, they were unemployed but still part of the labor force. Some episodes of nonwork were also easy to identify. However, there were cases in which determining labor force status for a particular man during a particular period was challenging. To the degree possible, I used probing questions during the interview itself to clarify these ambiguities in the moment, knowing during the interviews that a primary goal of the study was labor force nonparticipation. In these probes, I often asked the respondent how he would have characterized his

cases into two categories: 1) men continuously in the labor force since high school (or whenever they left high school if they dropped out), and 2) men for whom there was at least one period of a month or more since high school where they would have been outside the labor force. Based on this analysis, 13 of the 61 (21 percent) men have been continuously in the labor force since high school. Conversely, four-fifths of the of men (48 of 61, or 79 percent) have spent at least one month outside the labor force since high school. Next, I categorized each period outside the labor force by its length: short-term spells of nonparticipation are less than one year in duration, and long-term spells are one year or longer. Using these definitions, 34 of the 61 men (56 percent) have had at least one spell of short-term labor force nonparticipation, and 28 of the 61 men (45 percent) in the study had at least one spell of long-term labor force nonparticipation. Fourteen of the 61 (23 percent) had both short- and long-term spells of nonparticipation.

The first finding in this article is what I label *participation churn*, a term for the degree to which men move in and out of the labor force over time. As seen in Table 1, a cross-sectional employment snapshot of the men in this study at the time of the interview shows a high degree of labor force attachment. Nearly 80 percent of the men were employed at the time of the initial interview, and five percent did not have a job but were actively looking for work, meaning they would be considered in the labor force by the BLS. However, with the benefit of these men's lifetime labor force histories, I find that 80 percent of the men in the study have had at least one period outside the labor force since high school, and nearly half of the men have had at least one period outside the labor force of a year or longer. In short, while a cross-section of this sample shows strong labor force attachment, a longitudinal examination of the lifetime labor force histories of the same men finds a high prevalence of nonparticipation.

Consider the cases of two men from this study who look like very different men—from a labor force perspective—at different times of their lives. After high school, Sam drank himself out of two universities without a degree and landed back in his hometown, where he enrolled in a local university and got a job at a small manufacturer. His drinking was taking its toll on his performance at work, and he wondered why some of his coworkers seemed to recover so quickly from nights of hard partying. When he learned that it was because of crystal meth, his descent into addiction began. For two-and-a-half years in his early twenties, Sam dropped out of the formal labor force to make, sell, and take crystal meth. A brush with law enforcement in his mid-twenties caused him to stay clean for a few years, during which time he reattached to the labor force and even finished his bachelor's degree. However, in his late twenties he started using again, this time including other drugs like cocaine. For another two years, Sam was out of the labor force due to his addiction. This period ended abruptly when he was arrested on more serious charges, for which he eventually served several years in prison. Released from prison in his early thirties, Sam by that point had spent half of his twenties out of the labor force and another several years in prison (a population not counted in labor force statistics). However, since being released over six years ago, he has managed to stay clean and attached to the labor force. He now has a family and works in middle management for a local manufacturer. Sam's case illustrates how the same person can look very differently to the BLS over time, depending on when he would have been surveyed.

situation during those periods in which his labor force status was unclear. However, even after seeking clarification, ambiguity sometimes remained. For the purposes of assigning those ambiguous periods to a labor force status, I used my knowledge of the BLS questions and the context of the man's case to make an educated judgment. The analysis in this article does not hinge of whether my determination for the few ambiguous situations matches what the BLS might have found if the man had been interviewed in a given month. In fact, as will become clear in this article, these instances where labor force status is unclear provide the opportunity to expose how realities 'on the ground' are often more complex than surveys allow.

Jeremy, now in his late thirties, has worked most of this life but had two stints of nonwork in his twenties that lasted about two years each. In both cases, he had been laid off from a job and initially qualified for unemployment insurance. Single and living at home, he chose to delay his job search in favor of initially living on his unemployment benefits and occasional under-the-table work. He made about as much in this arrangement as he did in the low-wage jobs available at his skill and educational level, and he said he was able to find work when he wanted it. However, Jeremy never got fully comfortable outside the labor force, and he returned to formal work after each of his extended periods of official nonwork. After more years in low-wage jobs, he eventually secured a full-time position with the state of Pennsylvania, a job with good benefits, job security, and a pension that he has held for the last four years. Jeremy has had a relatively high degree of labor force attachment overall, including for the last ten years, but that masks the four years in his twenties when he was unattached to the formal labor force and would have appeared as 'not in the labor force' to the BLS.

This finding of participation churn has at least two implications for the measurement and understanding of nonwork. First, because the categories of worker and nonworker are not static, and a full accounting of declining labor force participation must consider this movement of individual workers in and out of the labor force over time. Stories like Sam and Jeremy's, which make up almost half the cases in this study, suggest that the men who the BLS finds out of the labor force are not the same men from month-to-month or even year-to-year. From a measurement perspective, the level of churn among the men in this study suggests that some portion of the declining labor force participation rate reflects an increased amount of participation churn, not an increase in permanent labor force dropout. In fact, this finding is corroborated by a recent econometric analysis by Coglianese (2017), who finds a group of men—the 'in-and-outs'—who take short breaks from work but are otherwise attached to the labor force. Coglianese's analysis suggests that 40 percent of the decline in men's labor force participation between 1984 and 2011 is attributable to men moving in and out of work.

Second, participation churn has a sociological implication for understanding nonwork, namely that observers should resist any impulse to reify the survey categories of worker and nonworker. While categories in survey research must be mutually exclusive, this carries the risk of assuming these categorical differences also involve qualitative distinctions. Some observers of declining labor force participation among prime-age men have suggested that the cultural norms around work have weakened or that those who are nonworking in a given moment are uninterested in work or quick to exchange work for leisure pursuits (Eberstadt, 2016; Hurst, 2016; Murray, 2012; Winship, 2017). However, what emerges in the labor force narratives of the men in this study is the fact that virtually all of the men are workers and nonworkers at different moments across their labor force histories. *Most men see themselves as workers and are, in fact, working most of the time*. However, this does not mean that some men—perhaps most men—do not take breaks from formal work when those decisions make sense in the context of their lives, as I explore in more detail below.

Before exploring the reasons for these labor force exits, it is worth noting that most men in this study who have an extended exit from formal work eventually return. Table 2 lists the 28 men in the study with at least one period of long-term labor force dropout, grouped by labor force status at the time of the interview and arranged by tenure at their current job in ascending order. There are two items to note. First, all but six of the 28 men were in the labor force at the time of the interview, suggesting that even longer-term spells of labor force nonparticipation are not permanent. Second, many of the men who returned to formal

work have shown longstanding labor force attachment: 16 of the 19 men with a job have been at their position for at least one year, and 10 of the 17 have been at their job for at least five years. These findings provide additional evidence that while men move in and out of the labor force over time, even those men with extended labor force exits eventually return to the formal labor force and persist in employment. This underscores the fact that the worker-nonworker binary is misleading, and even extended labor force exits are not to be equated with a lack of desire or ability to work.

Table 2. Current Labor Force Status of Respondents with Long-term Spells of Nonparticipation (N = 28)

Name	Age at Time of Interview	Labour Force Status at Time of Interview	Tenure at Current Job or in Current Status
Jeff	26	Not in labour force	10 months
Cody	37	Not in labour force	1.5 years
Richard[a]	35	Not in labour force	1.5 years
Trevor[a]	41	Not in labour force	3 years
Frank	22	Not in labour force	4 years
Jared[a]	43	Not in labour force	6 years
Brandon[a]	35	Unemployed	1 month
Christian	41	Unemployed	5 months
Victor	40	Unemployed	10 months
Gabe	27	Employed part-time	3 months
Kyle	29	Employed part-time	8 months
Evan	28	Employed part-time	1 year
Ryan	26	Employed part-time	1 year
Carl	31	Employed part-time	1 year
Brad[a]	37	Employed part-time	1.5 years
William[a]	39	Employed part-time	2.5 years
Patrick[b]	39	Employed part-time	5 years
Charles	39	Employed full-time	6 weeks
Jeremy	39	Employed full-time	4 years
Sam	37	Employed full-time	5 years
Jeremiah	38	Employed full-time	5 years
George	40	Employed full-time	6 years
Seth	40	Employed full-time	6 years
Alex	43	Employed full-time	6 years
Curtis[b]	33	Employed full-time	7 years
Dennis	33	Employed full-time	9 years
Zach	43	Employed full-time	11 years
Dustin	46	Employed full-time	15 years

[a] Indicates current receipt of disability benefits
[b] Indicates former receipt of disability benefits

Adaptive Nonparticipation

Having established that most men experience spells outside the labor force, this section examines the reasons why men leave work. Much has been made of this question in academic and policymaking circles, which often boils down to a debate between whether men are leaving work or work is leaving men. In what follows, I suggest that a better question is, how have working-class men adapted to a changed and

changing labor market that generally does not favor them. I argue that when men in this study leave the labor force, most of them are engaged in what I call *adaptive nonparticipation*, meaning their reasons for leaving formal work are generally constructive adaptations to their circumstances that make sense when understood contextually. Men are not eschewing the importance of work altogether, as supply-side explanations for declining labor force participation suggest, nor are they reacting to a situation in which there are literally no jobs, as demand-side explanations propose. In this way, leaving the labor force is an understudied type of EMW, a theme I develop at the end of this section.

Among the twenty men in this study with only short-term spells of labor force nonparticipation, by far the most common reasons for leaving work were to pursue post-secondary education or military service. The shorter-term spells of nonwork for education take different forms. In some cases, men went to college after high school, only to learn that college was not for them and pivot quickly to the labor force. For example, Derek did one semester at a technical college before leaving school: 'I just didn't like it. I didn't like the schoolin'.' When Derek got a job offer at a local tool and die shop, he left school for work and has been continuously in the labor force ever since, despite being laid off twice. Don's time in college was also short-lived. He went to college after high school to pursue a degree in wildlife technology, but he also realized it was not for him: 'But I literally partied my way out of school. But I was done with school. At 12 years, you know, I hated it. I went to college because I was supposed to and I didn't last very long there.' As with Derek, things worked out for Don: he worked on a farm for a couple years, and then got an offer to work in the oil and gas industry, a job he has had for the last 22 years. In other cases, men were laid off from work and took the opportunity to pursue more education or training, which took them out of the labor force for a relatively short time. Dan had worked for seven years at a warehouse, and when the company did some restructuring, they offered voluntary layoffs. He took the layoff, drew unemployment insurance, and used the opportunity to take a six-week course to earn his Commercial Driver's License (CDL), after which he started as a long-haul truck driver.

Several men also took short breaks from work before enlisting in the military or after returning from duty. Larry and Blake, who served in the Army and Coast Guard respectively, both took a little time off before and after their military service. Both men had a gap between when they enlisted and when they started boot camp, and each took that time to relax. Larry joined right out of high school, so he took the month off between graduating and starting in the Army. Blake had a longer wait, and he primarily used the time to get into better physical shape. Similarly, after getting out, both men had saved up some money and took the opportunity for a break. As Larry said, 'So, then I come back here, and I'm like, I have some money saved up, so I might as well take a month off and just not doing anything.' Overall, a consistent picture emerges of the men who had only short-term spells of nonparticipation: they are continuously attached to the labor force except for brief periods away from work, much like the 'in-and-outs' (Coglianese, 2017).

While short-term episodes of nonparticipation are important to understand, it is the longer-term spells of nonparticipation that are of greatest interest to observers of the declining labor force participation rate among prime-age men. It is understandable that men who are otherwise attached to the labor force might occasionally take short breaks from work; however, it is less explicable why men in their prime-earning years would go for one or more years without working or seeking work. Despite the high degree of labor force attachment of the men in this study at the time of interview (85 percent), an examination of the full labor force narratives of these 61 men finds that 28 of the 61—or 46 percent—have had at least one spell of nonparticipation of a year or longer since leaving high school. Why did these men leave the labor force?

Men in this study had many reasons for why they left the formal labor force for extended periods of time. The least surprising and most socially acceptable reason was for the pursuit of education or training[5]. For other respondents, spells of longer-term nonparticipation began with being laid off from low-wage jobs and initially qualifying for unemployment insurance, much like the story of Jeremy from above. Seth, when he was laid off from the sales job, drew unemployment insurance and stayed out of the formal labor force for a year and a half: 'Year and a half I floated. Totally floated.' Seth did what he needed to do to bring in enough income to supplement his UI. Single with low expenses, men like Jeremy and Seth opted for under-the-table work to make ends meet rather than immediately reattaching to the formal labor force, a situation for some that went on for years. For others, the decision to leave formal work was to stay home with young children while partners with better employment prospects worked. George, who said he 'always had a close relationship with my kids,' stayed home for about a year while his wife worked. A couple men dropped out of formal work for an extended time when a close family member died. In all these cases, men's labor force exit had a precipitating event that helps contextualize their decision. These men's cases also illustrate the sometimes-blurry line between unemployment and nonwork: many of these men occasionally generated at least minimal, often off-the-books income. However, even though some of these men could make almost as much doing odd jobs for cash as they could in formal work, there was still a pull back to work in the formal labor market. In most cases, men with extended exits eventually returned to the formal labor force and persisted in work.

One additional reason why some men in this study were outside the formal labor force deserves particular attention: the receipt of disability benefits. Several men in this study received these benefits: some were originally diagnosed for childhood disabilities that have persisted into adulthood; some receive disability for trauma related to their military service; and some qualified due to health problems or workplace-related injuries. I classify these cases as examples of adaptive nonparticipation for two reasons. First, it is beyond the scope of this article to assess whether the receipt of disability benefits is justified. If these men have been awarded benefits through proper channels, their claims are legitimate according to the current program standards. There was no evidence of fraud among the men I interviewed. Given that, it is adaptive for men to apply for benefits to which they are entitled, especially if a disability curtails their ability to generate enough income in the market to survive. The second reason why the behavior of those on disability in this study is adaptive is that the receipt of benefits itself is not a permanent off ramp from the labor force for most men who receive them. Disability provides an income floor for men with various diagnoses, but as seen in Table 2, more than half of the men in this study who receive disability benefits currently work—some above and some under-the-table—or have tried to work in the past. In some cases, the work is for the money, but in others, it is as much for a sense of community and structure. For the men on disability in this study, I interpret their actions—and hear in their explanations for applying for benefits—a desire to remain engaged and connected to work and the community it offers. The receipt of disability benefits is not synonymous with complete labor force dropout or lack of interest in work.

The one reason for leaving the labor force that was present among men in the study that I consider maladaptive was substance use disorder. For some men in the study, addiction to drugs or alcohol made it challenging to maintain labor force attachment. A few men in the study had periods of several years where they were fulltime drug dealers. Other men were unattached to the labor force due to struggles with alcoholism. A couple men in the study were recovering from opioid addictions, but they were out of the labor force for other reasons before their addictions occurred. The discovery of substance abuse among

[5] Among the men in this study, about half who had a spell of long-term nonparticipation for education ultimately earned their credential or degree.

these men is consistent with research that highlights the role of drug abuse with declining labor force nonparticipation (Krueger, 2017) and attention to the so-called 'deaths of despair' (Case & Deaton, 2020). It is noteworthy that several of these men were able to manage their addictions such that they have returned and persisted in formal employment[6]. Additionally, some men managed to maintain employment despite their substance use disorders.

Returning to the EMW framework, adaptive nonparticipation is a way that working-class people assert agency in their employment. As mentioned above, most of the periods of nonwork among the men in this study are not efforts to retreat from work permanently but are strategic choices that make sense contextually. Halpin and Smith (2017) argue that one key feature of EMW is the time/money matrix, which describes how workers constantly make tradeoffs between time and money to minimize downtime and maximize earnings. For example, in their interviews with immigrants in low-wage jobs, Halpin and Smith document the great effort of respondents to protect against unemployment, including by working multiple jobs, rarely turning down offers to work, and strategically creating demand for their labor, such as by signaling dedication to employers by working extra hours or not demanding overtime pay. While men in this study engaged in these behaviors at times, adaptive nonparticipation stands in apparent contrast to this drive to maximize earnings and employment.

There are two ways to address this apparent contradiction. First, when adaptive nonparticipation is viewed contextually in these men's lifetime labor force histories, an argument can be made that they are still operating within the time/money matrix. Men's reasons for leaving work—such as to enhance skills, in deference to a partner with greater earning power, or when they can work under-the-table for similar amounts of money but in less time—are consistent with EMW's emphasis on constant 'calculation, planning, and negotiating' (Halpin and Smith 2017, p. 350). There is evidence throughout the workforce histories of these men that their labor market behaviors are sensitive to concerns of both time and money. It is also worth noting again that most of these men are attached to the formal labor force most of the time, so episodes of nonwork—even extended ones—are exceptions, not the rule. A second possibility is that there might be something unique about some aspect of this sample—whether Whiteness, maleness, rurality, or some combination of these—that makes these men's cognitive frameworks different than other cases of working-class or low-wage workers. In either case, adaptive nonparticipation expands the parameters of EMW by suggesting that the decision to withdraw from the labor force completely—nonwork—can itself be a way that low-wage and disadvantaged workers manage their employment.

Discussion and Conclusion

The declining labor force participation rate among prime-age men has been an empirical and policy puzzle for many years. Using the lifetime labor force narratives of 61 working-class men in rural Pennsylvania, I explore the ways in which these men move in and out of the labor force and the reasons why. First, I identify the phenomenon of *participation churn*, in which men leave the labor force—often for one year

[6] Although not examined in this article, there is a small group of the men in this study—about 10% of the sample—who have been marginally attached to the labor force over time. These men look different from the other men in the study in the sense that they often have long gaps of unemployment or nonwork, yet it is less clear when compared with the adaptive nonparticipators that these men are interested in work or would take a job if one were available. While these men have held jobs, usually their periods of employment are short-lived. However, even these men show aspects of adaptive behavior. There is a pattern of trauma in the lives of some of these men that helps explain their challenge of maintaining employment. Further, for a couple of these men, their rejection of formal labor force participation is an active and rationalized choice that flows from rejections of certain cultural norms around work and an embrace of alternative visions of work and sustenance.

or more—yet usually reenter and persist in formal work. This finding complements the previous discovery of the 'in-and-outs' (Coglianese, 2017), and together, these findings suggest that a full account of declining labor force participation must consider the movement of men in and out of the labor force over time. Further, the fact that labor force dropout is not confined to a small number of men suggests that the survey research categories of worker and nonworker are not static and should not be reified. Second, I argue that most labor force exits are best understood as examples of *adaptive nonparticipation* in which men use both brief and extended periods outside of formal work as tools of employment management. Adaptive nonparticipation makes a theoretical contribution to the subfield of EMW by extending EMW to include nonwork.

These findings have several additional implications. First, the twin findings of participation churn and adaptive nonparticipation provide a possible explanation for why so few men who are out of the labor force report not wanting work (Eberstadt, 2016), a finding that has been interpreted by some observers as a lack of interest in work (Hurst, 2016; Murray, 2012; Winship, 2017) and support for the supply-side explanation of declining labor force participation. If most men see labor force nonparticipation as strategic and time-limited, then it is perfectly reasonable that men might report not wanting a job in the moment without it meaning that they are uninterested in work or unwilling to return to formal labor force participation when circumstances are right. This finding is especially relevant in the wake of COVID-19 when many workers withdrew (or were forced to withdraw) from the formal labor market. The fact that some have been reluctant to return to just any job underscores this type of calculus. Second, the role of drug and alcohol addiction in removing men from the formal labor force in this study suggests that any policy response to declining labor force participation must address substance use disorder. The hopeful finding in this study is that many men who left the labor force for reasons of substance use disorder returned to work once they received treatment. Finally, I must address the COVID-19 pandemic, which has precipitated a dramatic rise in unemployment and a steep drop in labor force participation. The research in this article occurred during a time of historically low unemployment and a tight labor market. In fact, the American labor force participation rate for prime-age men, while still low by historic standards, inched upward from its all-time low in 2014 until the start of the pandemic in 2020. Time will tell how quickly labor market demand returns and the ways in which labor is reallocated as employment revives. It bears watching—and studying—to see what EMW strategies they use to manage their work—and nonwork—in the months and years ahead.

This work is limited in several ways. First, conducting the project in a field site that is virtually all White precludes these data from speaking to the situation of working-class African Americans and other racial and ethnic groups who have faced well-documented barriers to employment that even disadvantaged Whites have not faced (Alexander et al., 2014). This may limit the applicability of these conclusions, but it opens the door for other studies that examine the labor force experiences of working-class men of other racial and ethnic backgrounds in rural places and beyond. The decision to focus on rural America was born of the interests of the researcher, who was raised in rural Pennsylvania in a working-class household. Part of the impetus for this work is seeing the ways my working-class father moved in and out of work, as well as a curiosity about what the younger generation of working-class men 'back home' do for work in a world where the local steel mill is long since shuttered. It is my hope that other scholars will pursue these questions in rural, suburban and urban locations to provide studies against which this one can be evaluated. Finally, I hope that other scholars will test these conclusions, especially regarding participation churn, against labor force participation data in hopes of an even fuller picture of the causes and consequences of declining labor force participation among prime-age men.

Author Bio

Robert Francis (PhD, Johns Hopkins University) is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington.

References

Aaronson, S., Cajner, T., Fallick, B., Galbis-Reig, F., Smith, C. L., & Wascher, W. (2014). *Labor Force Participation: Recent Developments and Future Prospects* (Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, pp. 197–275). https://www.brookings.edu/bpea-articles/labor-force-participation-recent-developments-and-future-prospects/

Abraham, K. G., & Kearney, M. S. (2020). Explaining the Decline in the US Employment-to-Population Ratio: A Review of the Evidence. *Journal of Economic Literature*, *58*(3), 585–643. https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20191480

Aguiar, M., Bils, M., Charles, K. K., & Hurst, E. (2017). *Leisure Luxuries and the Labor Supply of Young Men* (NBER Working Paper Series No. 23552). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/papers/w23552

Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., & Olson, L. (2014). *The long shadow: Family background, disadvantaged urban youth, and the transition to adulthood*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Autor, D. H., & Dorn, D. (2009). *Inequality and Specialization: The Growth of Low-Skill Service Jobs in the United States∗* (p. 60) [NBER Working Paper Series].

Autor, D. H., Katz, L. F., & Kearney, M. S. (2008). Trends in U.S. Wage Inequality: Revising the Revisionists. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, *90*(2), 300–323.

Black, S., Furman, J., Rackstraw, E., & Rao, N. (2016, July 6). The Long-term Decline in US Prime-age Male Labour Force Participation. *VoxEU.Org*. https://voxeu.org/article/long-term-decline-us-prime-age-male-labour-force-participation-and-policies-address-it

Case, A., & Deaton, A. (2020). *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton University Press.

Chen, V. T. (2015). *Cut Loose: Jobless and Hopeless in an Unfair Economy*. Univ of California Press.

Coglianese, J. (2017). *The Rise of In-and-Outs: Declining Labor Force Participation of Prime-Age Men* [Job Market Paper]. Harvard University. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/3b2a/9c08699a87aacfa34fa05a9b709952aa093f.pdf

Council of Economic Advisers. (2014). *The Labor Force Participation Rate Since 2007: Causes and Policy Implications*. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/labor_force_participation_report.pdf

Council of Economic Advisors. (2016). *The Long-Term Decline in Prime-Age Male Labor Force Participation*. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/page/files/20160620_primeage_male_lfp_cea.pdf

Damaske, S. (2011). *For the family?: How class and gender shape women's work*. Oxford University Press.

DeLuca, S., Clampet-Lundquist, S., & Edin, K. (2016). *Coming of age in the other America*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Deterding, N. M., & Waters, M. C. (2018). Flexible Coding of In-Depth Interviews: A Twenty-First-Century Approach. *Sociological Methods & Research, Online First*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124118799377

Dill, J., & Frech, A. (2019). Providing for a Family in the Working Class: Gender and Employment After the Birth of a Child. *Social Forces*, *98*(1), 183–210. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soy106

Eberstadt, N. (2016). *Men Without Work: America's Invisible Crisis*. Templeton Press.

Edin, K., & Kefalas, M. (2007). *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage*. University of California Press.

Goldin, C., & Katz, L. F. (1998). The Origins of Technology-Skill Complementarity. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *113*(3), 693–732. http:// doi.org/10.3386/w5657

Gross, N. (2009). A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms. *American Sociological Review*, *74*(3), 358–379. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240907400302

Halpin, B. W., & Smith, V. (2017). Employment Management Work: A Case Study and Theoretical Framework: *Work and Occupations*, *44*(4), 339–375. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888417720714

Hurst, E. (2016). Video Killed the Radio Star. *Chicago Booth Review*. http://review.chicagobooth.edu/economics/2016/article/video-killed-radio-star

Juhn, C., Murphy, K. M., Topel, R. H., Yellen, J. L., & Baily, M. N. (1991). *Why Has the Natural Rate of Unemployment Increased over Time?* (Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, pp. 75–142). https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/1991/06/1991b_bpea_juhn_murphy_topel_yellen_baily.pdf

Juhn, C., & Potter, S. (2006). Changes in Labor Force Participation in the United States. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *20*(3), 27–46. http://doi.org/10.1257/jep.20.3.27

Kalleberg, A. L. (2009). Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition. *American Sociological Review*, *74*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240907400101

Kalleberg, A. L. (2011). *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s-2000s*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Kaufman, G., & Uhlenberg, P. (2000). The Influence of Parenthood on the Work Effort of Married Men and Women. *Social Forces*, *78*(3), 931–947. https://doi.org/10.2307/3005936

Krueger, A. B. (2017). *Where Have All the Workers Gone? An Inquiry into the Decline of the US Labor Force Participation Rate* (Brookings Papers on Economic Activity). https://www.brookings.edu/bpea-articles/where-have-all-the-workers-gone-an-inquiry-into-the-decline-of-the-u-s-labor-force-participation-rate/

Murray, C. (2012). *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*. Crown Forum.

Newman, K. S. (2006). *Chutes and Ladders: Navigating the Low-Wage Labor Market*. Harvard University Press.

Newman, K. S. (2009). *No shame in my game: The working poor in the inner city*. Vintage.

Noguchi, Y. (2016, September 6). *An Economic Mystery: Why Are Men Leaving the Workforce?* NPR.Org. https://www.npr.org/2016/09/06/492849471/an-economic-mystery-why-are-men-leaving-the-workforce

Reskin, B. F. (2003). Including Mechanisms in Our Models of Ascriptive Inequality: 2002 Presidential Address. *American Sociological Review*, *68*(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.2307/3088900

Silva, J. M. (2013). *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford University Press.

Smith, V. (2002). *Crossing the Great Divide: Worker Risk and Opportunity in the New Economy*. Cornell University Press.

Stewart, J. (2006). Male Nonworkers: Who Are They and Who Supports Them? *Demography*, *43*(3), 537–552. https://doi.org/10.1353/dem.2006.0028

Tüzemen, D. (2018). Why are Prime-Age Men Vanishing from the Labor Force? *KcFed Economic Review*, *1*, 5–30.

Williams, C. L. (2006). *Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping, and Social Inequality*. University of California Press.

Winship, S. (2017). *What's Behind Declining Male Labor Force Participation: Fewer Good Jobs or Fewer Men Seeking Them?* Mercatus Center. https://www.mercatus.org/system/files/winship_malelaborparticipation_mr_v2.pdf

Ziliak, J. (2018). Are Rural Americans Still Behind? *IRP Focus*, *34*(2), 13–24. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Focus-34-2b.pdf/