
ROCK FALLS, Ill. — Alan Beggerow has stopped looking for work. Laid off as a steelworker at 48, he taught math for a while at a community college. But when that ended, he could not find a job that, in his view, was neither demeaning nor underpaid.

So instead of heading to work, Mr. Beggerow, now 53, fills his days with diversions: playing the piano, reading histories and biographies, writing unpublished Western potboilers in the Louis L’Amour style — all activities once relegated to spare time. He often stays up late and sleeps until 11 a.m.

“I have come to realize that my free time is worth a lot to me,” he said. To make ends meet, he has tapped the equity in his home through a $30,000 second mortgage, and he is drawing down the family’s savings, at the rate of $7,500 a year. About $60,000 is left. His wife’s income helps them scrape by. “If things really get tight,” Mr. Beggerow said, “I might have to take a low-wage job, but I don’t want to do that.”

 Millions of men like Mr. Beggerow — men in the prime of their lives, between 30 and 55 — have dropped out of regular work. They are turning down jobs they think beneath them or are unable to find work for which they are qualified, even as an expanding economy offers opportunities to work.

About 13 percent of American men in this age group are not working, up from 5 percent in the late 1960’s. The difference represents 4 million men who would be working today if the employment rate had remained where it was in the 1950’s and 60’s.

Many of these men could find work if they had to, but with lower pay and fewer benefits than they once earned, and they have decided they prefer the alternative. It is a significant cultural shift from three decades ago, when men almost invariably went back into the work force after losing a job and were more often able to find a new one that met their needs.

“But the fastest growing source of help is a patchwork system of government support, the main one being federal disability insurance, which is financed by Social Security payroll taxes. The disability stipends range up to $1,000 a month and, after the first two years, Medicare kicks in, giving access to health insurance that for many missing men no longer comes with the low-wage jobs available to them.

The disability program, in turn, is an obstacle to working again. Taking a job holds the risk of demonstrating that one can earn a living and is thus no longer entitled to the monthly payments. But staying out of work has consequences. Skills deteriorate, along with the desire for a paying job and the habits that it requires.
“The longer you stay on disability benefits,” said Martin H. Gerry, deputy commissioner for disability and income security at the Social Security Administration, “the longer you’re out of the work force, the less likely you are to go back to work.”

Despite their great numbers, many of the men not working are missing from the nation’s best-known statistic on unemployment. The jobless rate is now a low 4.6 percent, yet that number excludes most of the missing men, because they have stopped looking for work and are therefore not considered officially unemployed. That makes the unemployment rate a far less useful measure of the country’s well-being than it once was.

Indeed, a larger share of working-age men are not working today than at almost any point in the last half-century, which raises the question of how they will get by as they age. They may be forced back to work after years of absence, they may fall into poverty, or they may be rescued by the government. This same trend is evident in other industrialized countries.

Men like Mr. Beggerow, neither working nor looking for a job, also have become more common in the popular culture, making the phenomenon more acceptable. On the television show “Seinfeld,” Cosmo Kramer, who did not work, and George Costanza, who regularly lost jobs, were beloved figures. Personal-finance magazines whose circulations have grown rapidly over the last 25 years also encourage not working — by telling readers how to afford retirement at 50 and by painting not working as the good life, which it apparently is for a small number of wealthy men. About 8 percent of non-working men between 30 and 54 lived in households that had more than $100,000 of income in 2004.

“Men don’t feel a need to be in a career, not as much as they once did,” said Ruth Milkman, a sociologist at the University of California at Los Angeles. “Nor do men have the incentive they once had to pursue a career, not when employers are no longer committed to them.”
General Instructions

For this exam, use ink, write legibly on every other line of your paper, and use only one side of each page. You may use a dictionary, an electronic speller, and a thesaurus.

Print your instructor’s name in the upper right corner of this page. Print your own name on the back of the last page of your essay. Turn in your copy of "Men Not Working" along with your written exam and this sheet. Failure to follow directions will disqualify your exam.

Essay Format

Your assignment is to write a 500-700 word essay addressing the prompt given below. This essay must include an introductory paragraph, several central paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. The first paragraph must identify the author of the article and provide a clear and identifiable thesis statement. Each central paragraph must be based on a topic sentence that supports your thesis and that is developed from a variety of methods, such as explanation and elaboration, facts, quotations, examples, and references to authority. The concluding paragraph must bring the essay to a satisfactory close.

Prompt

"Men Not Working"

In the essay "Men Not Working," Louis Uchitelle and David Leonhardt tell of a man who won’t take just any job. Like many others, he has turned down some jobs or has been unable to find work for which he is qualified. The authors claim that our modern culture encourages people to retire early, portraying “not working as the good life.” What is your opinion on work – is it valuable, do we work too hard, is "not working" the good life?

Final Note

Remember that your general goal is to demonstrate to the reader of your essay that you have understood what you have read and that you have reacted sensitively and intelligently to it. Your specific goal is to write a well-constructed essay of the sort you have been studying and practicing all semester.