

“Disconnected” Men: Understanding Men’s Joint Roles as Workers and Romantic Partners



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A growing portion of men are disconnected from the formal labor market. Scholars have relied on men’s absence from the pool of “marriageable men” to explain declining marriage rates. Using interviews with sixty-one prime-age men who are out of the labor force, we examine the understanding men in nonmetropolitan areas have about how their workforce status conflicts with, comports with, or is unrelated to their role in a romantic union. Most do not judge their work status as making them “unmarriageable.” Some cite relationship obligations as conflicting with employment; others believe they fulfill the provider role through activities such as cash work and self-provisioning. Researchers should recognize the alternative ways men fulfill roles as resource providers, which we find go beyond formal employment. Men do value work, but they do not always define and prioritize work in the ways that have been the dominant focus of research.

Keywords: labor-force participation, romantic relationships, work, employment

More men are disconnected from roles in the worlds of work and family than in the past. In 1964, only 3 percent of prime-age men (twenty-five to fifty-four years old) with a high school degree or less did not participate in the U.S. labor force (were neither employed nor actively seeking employment); some fifty years later, the rate had quintupled, to about 15 percent (Breitwieser, Nunn, and Schambaugh 2018), the decline among less-educated men in nonmetro-

politan areas steeper than among their urban counterparts (Ziliak 2018). Labor-force participation rates declined during the Great Recession and never fully recovered, then steeply declined again during the COVID-19 pandemic (Guilford and Cambon 2020); the degree to which individuals will reenter the labor force remains to be seen.

Long-term changes in labor-force participation have taken place alongside deep changes

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in family life. A growing proportion of Americans are unmarried and cohabitation is not a stable partnership alternative to marriage in the United States (Cherlin 2009, 2014). As with labor-market trends, less-educated men and women have seen the most dramatic alterations to family life (Kreider and Ellis 2011), and the declines in marriage have been steeper in rural areas (Ziliak 2018). Taking these changes in work and family life together, a growing portion of American men are facing a fundamentally different social and economic world than previous generations did. Ariel Binder and John Bound (2019) argue that current explanations for the declining labor-force participation among prime-age men that focus on changing economic conditions or men’s health cannot comprehensively explain the change over time; they ask whether men’s changing family roles may be implicated.

In contemporary U.S. culture, men’s romantic partner roles include economic provider expectations that are distinct from the expectations for women (Parker and Stepler 2017). This suggests that gainful employment functions as a prerequisite for men entering a romantic union or to fulfilling the role expectations that come with it. Although more than half of prime-age men in the labor force are married, the same is true for only a third of those out of the labor force (Krause and Sawhill 2017). They may not operate under the same relational pressure to participate in the workforce, or they have more difficulty finding a partner because they are not employed. It may also signal a broader retraction from institutionally organized life in the realms of both work and romantic relationships. The cultural importance of formal employment in the United States has seen heightened visibility in policy debates about work requirements or disincentives connected to SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) during the Donald Trump administration (Waikar 2020) and to the expansions of Unemployment Insurance and the Child Tax Credit during the Joe Biden administration (Jaffe and Boak 2021; Stein and Viser 2021). We need to know more about how men’s nonworking status coincides or conflicts with their understanding of expectations in romantic partnerships. Without knowing their per-

ceptions of the opportunities and constraints they face, we cannot understand their work and family decisions or their reactions to related policies, such as those that incentivize, support, or require formal employment.

To address shortcomings in research, we draw on in-depth interviews with sixty-one prime-age men who were out of the labor force in rural Wisconsin. We analyze men’s discussions of how their workforce dislocation relates to their understanding of role expectations in romantic unions. We focus on nonmetropolitan areas given the important variation in a wide array of factors between metro- and nonmetro areas. For example, nonmetropolitan areas have disproportionately been the site of the opioid crisis (Keyes et al. 2014) and have higher disability rates (Sage et al. 2019). They have lower growth rates among new businesses (Renski 2008), higher rates of residents being out of work or among the working poor (Thiede, Lichter, and Slack 2018), and higher rates of informal work (Jensen, Tickamyer, and Slack 2019; see also Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018). Nonmetro residents also have more favorable attitudes toward marriage (Snyder 2011; Snyder, Brown, and Condo 2004). Recent research points to white, prime-age men in rural areas as particularly at risk for the negative social and psychological consequences of being out of the labor force (Graham and Pinto 2019). Men—but not women—in rural areas show an increased likelihood of mental health struggles in response to stressors compared to their metropolitan counterparts (Hoyt et al. 1997). Men’s experiences being outside the labor force, therefore, may be distinctive in nonmetropolitan settings.

BACKGROUND

Work—for its meaning, not just its income—is central to men’s identities (Cassar and Meier 2018; Morse and Weiss 1955; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010; Tausky 1969; but see Eberstadt 2016), for both those presently working and among the long-term unemployed (Kaplan and Tausky 1974). Tropes about the importance of work are so ingrained in American culture that even during the Great Recession as many experienced long-term joblessness, public discussions still often blamed those who were out

of work rather than the macroeconomic situation (Kenworthy and Owens 2011; Shear and Bararo 2012). The stigmatization of lacking employment seems even more pronounced in rural areas, where residents are more likely than their urban counterparts to fault a lack of adequate work effort as the reason for people's poverty (McCoy 2017).

Although both men and women who are out of the labor force report lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction than their employed counterparts, the differences are starkest for men (Krueger 2017; Mossakowski 2009). Anne Case and Angus Deaton (2017) point to declining labor force participation as one of the culprits behind rising rates of substance-use-related deaths and suicides (see also Pierce and Schott 2016). Numerous studies detail the crushing social, psychological, and physical consequences of job loss, especially when followed by a prolonged period of joblessness and in cultural contexts in which work is highly valued (Carmichael, Hulme, and Porcellato 2013; Oliffe and Han 2014; Rueda et al. 2012; Stavrova, Schlösser, and Fetchenhauer 2011; Strully 2009; Winkelmann 2009; Young 2012). Further, part of the pain of job loss, at least for some, comes from their consequent inability to fulfill their family economic contributor role (Lassus, Lopez, and Roscigno 2015; Newman 1988; Rao 2017; Sherman 2013). Without work, therefore, we should expect men to feel more of a loss associated with their labor-market position than their female counterparts because it so directly contradicts the gendered expectations that come with their family roles (Michniewicz, Vandellos, and Bosson 2014; see also Basbug and Sharone 2017).

Researchers often focus on formal work as a key area of boundary work, individual and cultural determinations of deservingness being made on the basis of formal employment status (Lamont 2000; Sherman 2009; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). A few scholars, however, delineate hierarchies among those working outside the formal labor market in urban areas. For example, Mitchell Duneier (1999) finds that

street vendors present themselves as superior to those who panhandle or engage in illegal (as opposed to their own illicit) activities. Teresa Gowan (2010) shows that those who scavenged recycling materials to sell found self-respect and feelings of productivity in these activities. It is an empirical question for romantic relationships whether the claim to a formal worker identity is what is key, or whether alternative, informal activities can similarly represent contributions toward personal identity and obligations in romantic unions.

Prime-Age Men

Prime age encompasses men's primary years for building a career and forming a family, absences from the labor force potentially having substantial implications in both realms. Previous studies of disconnected men have often focused on late adolescence and young adulthood, in which disconnection from school and employment can be seen as a phase in ongoing development, and one that a young person could grow out of (Roy and Jones 2014) or transition out of with assistance (Hoffman, Hemmeter, and Bailey 2017). However, disconnection at the start of adulthood could be a sign of what is to come across the life course, rather than a temporary low point (Mortimer et al. 2008; Settersten et al. 2014; Sum et al. 2014). Further, taking on family roles earlier in life may put men on more stable employment paths moving forward (Koenigsberg, Garet, and Rosenbaum 1994).

Unlike women, men who are out of the labor force and not in school are often disconnected from core social institutions, such as employers, marriage, and parenthood. Whereas 60 percent of prime-age women cite unpaid caregiving or taking care of the home as their reasons for being out of the labor force, a comparable proportion of prime-age men cite their own illness or disability (Krause and Sawhill 2017). Disconnected men are more likely than their female counterparts to live in a household in the bottom income quintile (Schanzenbach et al. 2017).¹ Although nine in ten prime-age men

1. Household statistics such as this may underestimate specific members' income and work effort; they also do not represent individuals who do not reside in households because they are unhoused, incarcerated, or highly transient.

who are out of the labor force have worked full time at some point in the past, only a quarter ever earned more than \$40,000 a year (Appelbaum 2014). In national surveys, prime-age men who are out of the labor force report a desire to work, but not necessarily in the job options available to them (Leonhardt 2014), meaning that they see their lack of employment as a less preferred option. Men who are disconnected from the workforce must manage the implications of this status in other arenas of life, as with current or potential romantic partners.

Work and Romantic Unions

The prevailing view among researchers is that men’s success as workers determines their ability to form partnerships and fulfill role expectations in those unions. William Julius Wilson and others laid out an argument—the “marriageable men” hypothesis—that maintains, most basically, that marriage rates decline when men are less economically attractive partners (Wilson 1987; Wilson and Neckerman 1987). Men’s economic prospects are predictive of marriage rates, but the strength of this association remains in question (Harknett and Kuperberg 2011; Lichter et al. 1992; Lichter, McLaughlin, and Ribar 2002; Mare and Winship 1991; Sassler and Goldscheider 2004; Schneider and Reich 2014). Nonetheless, researchers often rely on the idea underlying the marriageable men hypothesis—that being in a bad financial position means a man is not partner material—to help explain differences in marriage by race and socioeconomic status (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2019; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005; Smeeding, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2010; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005). Daniel Schneider, Kristen Harknett, and Matthew Stimpson write that “The idea that men are expected to possess some threshold level of economic resources to be normatively marriageable is longstanding in demography” (2018, 792).

Wilson’s original argument focused on explaining marriage trends in urban areas; subsequent research has shown that the same relationship between economic factors and romantic relationships holds in nonmetropolitan areas (Betz and Snyder 2017) and for

nonmarital relationships (see, for example, Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Oppenheimer 2003; Schneider, McLanahan, and Harknett 2016; Zavodny 1999). Although studies have almost exclusively focused on these questions for opposite-sex couples, the egalitarian division of labor and finances common in same-sex relationships means that the need for men to find labor market success is similarly likely to be an issue in same-sex relationships (for further discussion, see Burns, Burgoyne, and Clark 2008). A related literature details the earnings and employment boost seen with the transition to fatherhood (Glauber 2008; Hodges and Budig 2010). Whether romantic unions and fatherhood are a “package deal” for men (Townsend 2010) or father-child bonds are primary and the relationship between parents secondary (Edin and Nelson 2013), parenthood may also create factors that shape men’s labor-force participation and the need for them to manage their economic status within their family relationships.

Recent research suggests a more nuanced understanding of the variation among men who have limited economic prospects. John Coglianesse (2018) distinguishes between prime-age men’s permanent versus temporary exits from the labor force, finding that an increase in temporary exits accounts for about one-third of the decline in labor-force participation among prime-age men since the 1970s; notably, about half of these temporary exits are by married or cohabiting men, whose partners’ rising earnings help explain their ability to detour out of the formal labor force. In contrast with a core tenet of the marriageable man hypothesis, then, family support may enable some men to withdraw from employment (but see Tüzemen 2018).

A key limitation of many of the studies predicting marriage from men’s economic status is that they focus on factors like wages or hours worked, which mathematically makes it appear as though a man having no formal earnings is functionally equivalent to having nothing to offer as a potential partner. However, we do not know enough about the practicalities and symbolism of being partially or entirely disconnected from the formal labor market in terms of how people evaluate themselves as current

or potential partners. That is, when it comes to romantic relationships, do all men similarly see themselves, or believe that they are seen, as “not partner material” if they are out of the formal labor market? How is disconnection from the workforce understood in ongoing unions? How might informal work or other avenues of resource generation matter?

Assessments of men as partners may go beyond the expectation of economic provision. For example, criminal records might affect both work and romantic opportunities given that low-income women report men’s criminal involvement as a factor in ending their relationships (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin and Reed 2005). However, Katie Derzon (2018) indicates that some women may not see a man’s history of incarceration as a disqualifying characteristic in evaluating a potential relationship partner; because some women have commonly seen family members and friends incarcerated, the experience is less stigmatized. These same women also reported expecting their children’s fathers to be involved in their lives, but not necessarily to be primary economic providers, especially if factors like a felony record limited their employment opportunities. That is, women expected efforts at involvement, not success economically, in assessing men’s fulfillment of their family roles. Indeed, formerly incarcerated men who are not searching for jobs often report being engaged in household and care work (Sugie 2014). Because these studies take place in urban settings, it remains an empirical question whether this will hold in nonmetro areas as well.

The present study investigates men’s views of themselves in regard to their financial and family roles in a nonmetropolitan setting; this allows us to see whether the perspectives the men express align more closely with the marriageable man perspective or an alternative, such as Derzon presents, in which efforts at fulfilling family roles, rather than formal financial or labor market accomplishments, are a key metric in assessing men’s potential for successful role fulfillment.

DATA AND METHODS

Our study draws on interviews with sixty-one “disconnected” men between the ages of

twenty-five through fifty-four from nonmetropolitan Wisconsin counties. Men in our study self-identify as neither having a formal job nor actively seeking a formal job. We do not use the Bureau of Labor Statistics definition of being “out of the labor force,” which specifies that workers have forgone job search activities for the past month, because previous research indicates that the distinction between this state and that of long-term unemployment can be fuzzy (Goldsmith, Veum, and Darity 1995; see also Coglianesi 2016, 2018; Elsby, Hobihh, and Şahin 2015). Generally, the respondents in our sample had not applied for formal jobs recently; a few described some half-hearted efforts, such as Garrett, thirty, who recalled during the interview that he had put in an application at a fast-food restaurant a few weeks back, prompting him to speculate that it would be a good idea for him to follow up with them.

We interviewed respondents between September 2018 and January 2020, finishing before the deep social and economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Wisconsin, where the study was situated, labor-force participation rates among prime-age men varied widely across the state, nonmetro county rates ranging from 61 to 93 percent prior to data collection. Since the Great Recession, Wisconsin had seen ongoing job growth and a relatively low unemployment rate, yet income growth had been limited at the lower end of the distribution, unionization had declined substantially, and the middle class had shrunk (Dresser, Rogers, and Whittaker 2017; Kaeding 2017). Some factory owners in the state decried the lack of available workers and turned to automation as a result (Harlan 2017). Therefore, the men in our study were not often in a position of there being no jobs available whatsoever, as it was a tight labor market in the state; the characteristics and locations of the jobs available, however, often did not match what they were willing or able to do.

We recruited participants using a variety of methods, our primary techniques being distributing flyers and posting ads in the gigs section of Craigslist. We posted flyers in convenience stores, game stores, technical colleges, an aging and disability resource center, medical centers, a veteran’s service office, laundro-

mats, public libraries, grocery stores, Head Start centers, food pantries, smoke shops, and pain clinics. We did not gather data on the ways men learned about the study, but do know they came through a variety of recruitment channels based on what they said while chatting before or after interviews. All who responded to these posts were asked whether they self-identified as men, were age twenty-five to fifty-four, were not formally employed or actively seeking formal employment, and lived in one of Wisconsin's nonmetro counties. Respondents were offered \$40 for their time in participating in the study. We conducted semi-structured interviews in person, which typically lasted about 1.5 hours (from 52 minutes to 4 hours 17 minutes) and were recorded and transcribed, and wrote field notes to document events or tone from the interview that would not be captured in the transcripts. The interviews asked men about their experiences with education and parents' employment while growing up, their own work and family histories, their attitudes toward work, their views of their current work opportunities, abilities, and financial support options, how they spent their time and made ends meet, and what hopes and expectations they had for the future in terms of employment and family. In the results, all respondents are identified by pseudonyms.

For this study, we coded the interviews in two ways. First, we used deductive coding to document the presence or absence of the themes the interviews were intended to elicit, including coding all excerpts that pertained to men's perspectives on and experiences with romantic relationships. Second, we took the excerpts initially coded as having to do with men's reports about and perspectives on romantic relationships and coded them based on whether and how they were related to men's views of themselves as workers, employees, providers, contributors, and so on. Two researchers primarily did the coding, and the research team participated in regular coding reliability checks to ensure that codes were being applied similarly by both coders, any differences being discussed and reconciled. We then analyzed the patterns in how these roles of worker and romantic partner hung together to derive the set of groups presented here.

RESULTS

Drawing on our interview data, we describe patterns in disconnected men's views of how their work status relates to current or potential romantic partnerships; we identified four groups. The first group saw their work status in much the same way as anticipated by the marriageable man hypothesis, that is, as dominating their actual or potential success as a romantic partner. The second group presented their family care obligations as competing with the obligation to work, thus precluding their participation in the formal labor market. The third group saw work and partner roles as independent concerns. The final group maintained that they had alternative approaches to contributing economic resources to their households and thereby of fulfilling their obligations as romantic partners.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of our participants overall, as well as broken down by group. Given the small sample sizes, we do not focus on comparing demographic characteristics among groups. As in most qualitative work, our aim is not to have a representative sample; rather, we were aiming to see the types of experiences and perspectives that exist across members of this population. We therefore pay only limited attention to the numbers of study participants in each group because we are not trying to generalize from their proportions to a larger population. Also, we do not argue that these groups represent permanent perspectives men hold because men's life circumstances, as well as the views they hold, may change over time. For example, some cases display perspectives that partially fit with multiple analytic categories (for example, a man might contrast a previous and a current relationship); here we focus on their primary groupings, that is, those they describe as most relevant to their present circumstances. We therefore treat each group in the typology as providing useful analytic information about how men can understand their work and partnership obligations, which may be competing, mutually reinforcing, or unrelated at various points in their life course and in context-specific ways.

Similar to the overall makeup of the state of Wisconsin, the vast majority of the men in our

Table 1. Participant Characteristics (N = 61)

	Group 1: Work First (N = 15)		Group 2: Balancing Act (N = 5)		Group 3: Beside the Point (N = 19)		Group 4: My Way (N = 22)		Total (N = 61)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age (mean)		(38.5)		(38.6)		(41.3)		(41.4)		(40.4)
White	13	86.7	5	100.0	16	84.2	20	90.9	54	88.5
Currently in a Relationship	6	40.0	4	80.0	2	10.5	19	86.4	31	50.8
Marital status										
Currently married	0	0.0	2	40.0	0	0.0	7	31.8	9	14.8
Previously married	3	20.0	0	0.0	3	15.8	3	13.6	9	14.8
Has children	8	53.3	4	80.0	10	52.6	15	68.2	37	60.7
Coresides with Children	4	26.7	3	60.0	4	21.1	7	31.8	18	29.5
High school diploma or GED	12	80.0	4	80.0	16	84.2	15	68.2	47	77.0
Jail or prison	7	46.7	1	20.0	7	36.8	13	59.1	28	45.9
Cites substance use as obstacle to work	5	33.3	1	20.0	5	26.3	4	18.2	15	24.6
Disability benefits										
Receiving	1	6.7	1	20.0	5	26.3	4	18.2	11	18.0
Under review	3	20.0	0	0.0	3	15.8	2	9.1	8	13.1
SNAP receipt	6	40.0	3	60.0	12	63.2	13	59.1	34	55.7
Has health insurance	9	60.0	5	100.0	17	89.5	19	86.4	50	82.0

Source: Authors' calculations.

study are white (Kemp 2018). Slightly more than half are in relationships at the time of the interview, including a minority who are married (14.8 percent). Although a majority have children (60.7 percent), less than one-third live with a child presently (29.5 percent). Men in this study are highly reflective of the educational levels most associated with increases in labor-force nonparticipation—those with a high school degree and some college experience (Tuzeman 2018): more than three-quarters have at least a high school diploma or GED (General Educational Development) but few completed postsecondary education. A majority of men receive SNAP, in line with the estimate that 45 percent of households with disconnected men are in the bottom income quintile (Schanzenbach et al. 2017); 82 percent have some kind of health insurance. In line with estimates that one-third of disconnected prime-age men are disabled (Krueger 2017), 18 percent of participants receive some form of disability benefits, including Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income, and another 13.1 percent are awaiting disability case review; disability is not unique to any one of the four groups. Although we did not systematically collect incarceration histories, participants did include such experiences as they described their life history. At least 45.9 percent spent time in jail or prison, which is higher than estimates from a national poll of prime-aged nonworking men, in which one-third reported having a criminal record (Appelbaum 2014); incarceration history is distributed fairly evenly across the four groups. Because many men do not have clear “exit dates” from the labor force (Coglianese 2018), often cycling in and out, we do not report men’s length of time out of formal employment.

Group 1: Work First

About one-quarter of participants ($n = 15$) describe their dislocation from the formal labor force as undermining their ability to fulfill the role expectations of a romantic union. One way in which men in this group espouse the notion that they should be a provider in a relationship is by presenting themselves as outside the relationship eligibility pool. For example, Greg, a fifty-three-year-old man, has had only one seri-

ous relationship in his life, which he ended because he believed he could not fulfill his role. He says he has “something wrong,” explaining that it takes him a long time to understand and figure out new situations, new instructions, and so on. When he ended his relationship, he decided he could not pursue another because he saw the problem as lying in him, not with the partnership. Specifically, he cites his personal limitations as preventing him from earning an adequate income, which he believes one must have to be married and have children. “I knew I had something wrong. And I thought, ‘Well, don’t go having a bunch of kids. Don’t get married and pull some poor woman into this.’ . . . But if you want to get married, you got to have money, you can’t be saying, ‘Oh, I can’t afford diapers . . . or a laptop.’ I mean you got to be willing to spend some money if you’re going to get married. So, I kind of look at it like, I’m probably better off not to.”

Greg’s self-assessments demonstrate how men can internalize social norms regarding the qualifications for a committed relationship instead of simply being rejected by potential partners. Whereas Greg sees this as an enduring obstacle to future partnerships, others see their circumstances as not reflecting their personal value. Gene, forty, describes himself as unattractive to potential partners because of his current work status and lack of income, and says that, as a result, he has avoided dating. In doing so, he cites his anticipation that he would not be “well-received” on dating apps. Notably, he still believes that he has “a great deal to offer” a potential partner, but his fears about others’ judgments of his work and income status have meant he has not been willing to take the risk of putting himself out there. Unlike Greg, however, Gene does not seem reconciled to this situation, noting, “I haven’t been trying. And there’s a cost to that. It’s very lonely.”

Men who view their work status as an obstacle see participation in the work force as a necessary precondition to future romantic success. Garrett, thirty, explains: “Well, I’m not looking for females like I used to. I’m just trying to, you know, set things that I know I can accomplish. One thing at a time. Getting a job. And the next thing is getting a car and then af-

ter that it's going to be getting my own place. And then after that is when I might start looking for a woman, but right now that's how it's going to go: job, car, house, relationship, possibly family, marriage." In Garrett's description, we see that his outlook is fixed on a causal chain leading from work to romantic relationship success, as in the marriageable man hypothesis.

Men who convey the Work First perspective and are in serious relationships see their partner roles as troubled by their disconnection from the formal labor force. Some explain that they fail to meet their partners' expectations. For example, thirty-three-year-old Sam says his partner has a strong work ethic and is an independent person who can provide for herself and their two-year-old without him, should she choose to do so. Although he would like to pull his own weight, he says his struggles with anxiety prevent him from working. He describes the frustration he feels because his girlfriend continues "belittling and berating [me] because I don't have a job. 'You're not a real man.' You know, 'I could find a real man out there.'" Sam's girlfriend draws on a well-known norm about men's obligation to work, citing his failure to do so as diminishing his social status; Sam sees her as having weaponized this norm, alleging "they use it against us." Ironically, he says, his girlfriend's response to his lack of employment has exacerbated his anxiety, making it that much harder for him to seek work. Likewise, thirty-five-year-old Ian sees getting a formal job as necessary to stepping it up in his relationship. He and his girlfriend of three years are both addicted to heroin, and his use recently led to a three-month stint in jail. Neither of these factors, in Ian's mind, stand in the way of his relationship's future; his lack of a job, however, does.

I have finally realized after all these years, I really need a job, and the only way she's going to, you know, want to stay with somebody, you know, is if I have a job, you know. If somebody does not have work, you know, you're a loser, you're lazy, you know. . . . I want to show her that she can depend on me and not have to worry about, you know, oh, if we get a place together is she the only one going to be pay-

ing the bills, you know. I don't want her to have to worry about that because she always has.

In other cases, men express feelings of failing as romantic partners despite believing that their partners did not blame them for their work status. James, forty-one, a former assembly worker suffering from chronic back pain, lives with his long-time fiancée and her teenage daughter. He says, "Nobody gives me a hard time, except myself. I'm the hardest person on me." He explains that not working is a blow to his sense of self. "I've always worked. I've been working since I was nine, and having no money to support your family, and nothing to do all day, is pretty tough." From James, we hear how financially providing is only one piece of the puzzle. He expects to be approved for SSDI and thus to be able to contribute financially to the household again. But this would not make up for the fact that work itself—apart from offering financial resources—is something important to his sense of self. He suspects he will rely on SSDI for the long term, which leaves him feeling dejected. Work, he says, "is the only way to make money," implying that other ways of procuring resources are less valid. Perhaps his partner's acceptance of his circumstances has allowed their relationship to continue, unlike Greg and Gene, who have withdrawn from their search for romantic partners.

For each case in the Work First group, men see their status as disconnected workers as discrediting. They treat their work status as a reflection of their personal deficiencies or as a social marker that precludes opportunities for forming romantic relationships. Men who are already in relationships likewise describe their work status as diminishing their standing within the relationship, either in their partner's eyes or their own. Across these varied circumstances, the men in this first group share an understanding of the financial provider role, fulfilled through employment, as essential to their ability to take on and succeed in romantic partnerships. This perspective aligns with the expectations of research focused on the marriageable man hypothesis. Nonetheless, we see that only a minority of the men in our sample held this view.

Group 2: Balancing Act

The second group identified by our analysis represents a reprioritization of men’s obligations to be employed. In this group, men account for their disconnection from the labor force as deriving from obligations tied to their romantic unions. That is, the expectations of a romantic union involve responsibilities beyond providing income. Efforts to balance conflicting expectations may lead a man not to pursue formal employment. Although the number of cases that fit squarely with this pattern is small ($n = 5$), the category is analytically important because it captures how men negotiate multiple aspects of their partner roles and how those aspect may at times conflict with one another.

Caretaking responsibilities emerge as a deterrent to some men’s participation in the workforce. Most often, the duties that they cite involve caring for children, but some men also reference caring for aging parents or partners with health problems. Although these caretaking obligations might be argued to be associated with their roles as parents or adult children, negotiations over these expectations and who should fulfill them are presented as a matter taken up in men’s romantic unions. This made the distinction between partner and parent roles, for example, seem artificial, leading us to consider such expectations as part of men’s romantic partner “role-set” (Merton 1968), or the patterned expectations of conduct attached to a confluence of roles one has by virtue of interconnected social statuses, such as partner-parent. Further, for some men, romantic partner and parenting roles are tied together as part of a “package deal” (Townsend 2010).

Some men see their care obligations as taking precedence over their work obligations. Conrad is now married and in his mid-thirties. Several years back, he was working in restaurants when he and his then-girlfriend found out that they were having a child. He decided he needed to get more serious about the relationship and get his life together. “Holy crap. I got to buy a house. Got to hunker down; got to get ready. You know what I mean, like, the kid is coming.” Conrad’s response to parenthood followed the model of a traditional male-

breadwinner household organized around him working and his partner parenting. He recalls thinking of his then-girlfriend, “Kids are coming. You don’t have to work, honey.”

His thinking changed after their son was born with a debilitating medical condition that requires constant care. The demands of their child’s health issues are so great that Conrad feels he cannot regularly leave his wife alone to deal with extreme health events. He doesn’t trust that his wife or the ambulance service would respond fast enough to one of his son’s health crises, so Conrad wants to constantly be on standby to drive to the hospital. As a result, neither adult works outside the home, and the family makes ends meet with their son’s disability benefits and other public assistance resources. Conrad presents himself as displeased with, but reconciled to, this state of affairs. “I’m not applying for jobs because every job requires a specific set of time and dedication to that job. And at some point . . . I’m going to have to look at that job and say, ‘No, you do not control how much time I spend with my son. End of story,’ and walk away” (on the challenges of managing childcare without control over one’s work schedule, see Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022, this issue).

Conrad views himself as both the most able income earner and the most able caretaker in a crisis, and so also sees himself as making a moral choice between staying home to triage a health emergency and improving the living standards of his family by earning a better income. However, Conrad says his wife thinks that he should work but still “be close to the phone and get ready to react.” Conrad feels this would be a violation of his duty to her. “That’s where it’s just like, well, I have to help. Like, I can’t just shove this all on her.” Rather than breaching his duty to provide economically, Conrad sees himself as fulfilling a more pressing obligation to care for his son and, through that, his wife.

A man may attribute his ongoing disconnection from work to childcare responsibilities, even when a separate issue prompts his exit from the labor force. At thirty-six, Jonathon lives with his wife, their three children, his wife’s mother, his wife’s sister, the mother’s boyfriend, and the sister’s boyfriend in a two-

bedroom apartment. He has another child with a former partner but has little contact with them. He has been formally employed only once in his life and quit this job because of the wage garnishments for child support. “I know I’ve got to pay child support but, I don’t know, they ain’t got to take so much. They take so much then I just get down on myself and I just quit.”

Being out of the labor force has meant that Jonathon takes on much of the work of caring for his children while his wife is at work. He says he would like to find a job but is precluded from such opportunities by his caretaking role; his mother says she would watch the kids, but given their rocky history, he doesn’t feel he can trust her. His wife disagrees. “We always get into a lot of fights because I always bring up, you know, who’s going to watch the kids. . . . If I leave, I want to know they’re okay, you know, instead of going to work or something and getting a call.” In framing his concerns this way, Jonathan enacts the very caretaking role in question and demonstrates that, for him, the issue is whether he can balance this primary obligation with the expectation to work outside the home. His wife doesn’t share his assessment of their options, but because the couple treats her primary role as the earner and his as the caretaker, the situation has remained as it is, despite their disagreement (for further discussion of childcare challenges, see Pilarz, Sandstrom, and Henly 2022, this issue).

Because of other resources available to their households, such as their partner’s labor or public benefits, the men in the Balancing Act group may have been able to make a choice to prioritize direct care over providing additional resources to their household. They construct their disconnection from the labor force as reflecting the moral ranking of the multiple obligations they see attached to their unions. Rather than as an abandonment of the obligation to work, they frame their separation from the formal workforce as deriving from their moral assessment of competing obligations. Indeed, it is the valuation of working outside the home that renders their care work a moral triumph (for more on men’s involvement with their children, see Rangel and Peck 2022, this issue).

Group 3: It’s Beside the Point

A third group consists of men who describe their disconnection from the workforce as unrelated to the expectations of a romantic union. The great majority of the nineteen men who fit this pattern were not in a relationship at the time of the interview. Some of these men may prefer to be alone, an increasingly common preference in contemporary U.S. society (Klinenberg 2013), meaning the romantic partner role is not a salient consideration for them; alternatively, they may simply see their economic success as “beside the point” and separate from their attractiveness as a partner. Although some men in group 1 are not currently partnered or pursuing relationships, their orientation is distinctive from those in group 3. Whereas men in group 1 saw their relationship status as troubled or precluded by their lack of formal employment, men in group 3 did not discuss their relationship status as contingent on their employment status, nor did they present improving their economic status as desirable in providing a path to partnership.

Henry, twenty-nine, questions the relevance of queries about his previous relationships during his interview, after describing a relationship in which he “probably didn’t carry my weight for the most part.” When the interviewer asks him more about how he and his partner managed their finances, he draws on the description of the research interview as focusing on men’s employment experiences, responding, “I don’t know. I prefer to not talk about the relationship. Do you feel like that has like something to do with this? Or are you just covering everything?” With this, Henry rejects the notion that his romantic unions were relevant terrain in a discussion of his employment experiences; notably, he does not similarly reject questions about his prior educational experiences or childhood.

Other men describe factors, such as chronic health conditions, that preclude them from both employment and romantic partner roles. For example, Craig, a forty-seven-year-old with considerable work experience, lives with kidney failure. A serious romantic relationship had ended before he was diagnosed, and he now sees his health as preventing him from even considering the possibilities of either

work or a partnership. Likewise, at forty-nine, Wes lives a reclusive life, spending most of his time in the apartment he shares with his son. Obesity limits how far he is able to travel and what he can do; other health complications, such as COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), also affect his lifestyle. Like Craig, he sees his health as impeding his search for both work and a romantic partner. Of the four groups, men in the Beside the Point group were the most likely to report currently receiving or being in the application process for disability benefits, suggesting these health factors may be key. For them, simultaneously lacking employment and romantic partners may be a “spurious correlation.”

Other men in the Beside the Point group, including those without addiction or health issues, similarly describe priorities other than pursuing a relationship. For example, Waylan, a man in his late thirties who had become jaded with office politics and decided to instead work short-term and cash jobs that provided a greater variety of experiences, describes his ambiguity toward seeking out a romantic union, “It’s not like a super—my priority, and I don’t, like, want to go out searching—I used to go out searching for it, I suppose, and it never turned out. It never worked out that great.” For Waylan and some other men who see their disconnection from formal labor as Beside the Point, any aspirations to work were not presented as a means of entering a romantic relationship, in contrast with the unattached men in the Work First group.

Men in the Beside the Point group share the perspective that romantic partnerships neither propel them to desire financial success nor are an option that greater financial success would earn them. Their worker and partner roles are not strongly integrated, as underlined by Henry’s confusion about us discussing both as part of the same interview. Other men in this group, such as Craig and Wes, faced health issues that precluded the practicality of either employment or a romantic union, making the connection between these roles “beside the point.”

Group 4: I Do It My Way

The final group breaks from dominant norms about men as employed providers within rela-

tionships. About one-third of the men in our study ($n = 22$) describe their efforts at gathering resources outside formal work as compatible with the role-set attached to romantic partnerships. For some men in our study, the absence of formal work does not mean an abandonment of the provider role, but a modification of it. As with the Work First perspective, these men convey an expectation that they are meant to contribute resources to their relationship; in contrast with the Work First view, however, they do not maintain that their contribution must be earned through formal employment.

Some men in the My Way group see their disability benefits as a way of credibly fulfilling their provider role in their relationships, despite the modest sum that these benefits provide. Kevin, fifty-one, is a former construction worker who has suffered multiple heart attacks and now relies on SSDI to make ends meet for himself and his partner. His partner is not working because of her own serious health problems, but her application for SSDI has been repeatedly denied. He presents himself as a provider, saying, “I do what I’ve got to do for me, nobody else. Oh, and my missus, I’ve got to take care of her too.” Kevin sees himself as fulfilling the sense of obligation he has successfully, even if the income he uses to cover their needs comes from government benefits rather than current employment.

Some men find other ways to secure resources and fulfill expectations as a provider in their relationships. Many such alternatives rely on informal economic activities, such as cash work, bartering, or self-provisioning (living off the land). For some, having a formal job matters less than the ability to assemble whatever work they can to get by. Tony, twenty-six, refers to this approach to life as “throwing my hands in.” Tony is not currently in a relationship; he lives with a woman he calls his sister because their families were so close when they were growing up. He has moved between formal and informal work throughout his adult life. Working in his sister’s driveway, he now fixes cars and trucks for cash or barter, as well as taking whatever other cash work crosses his path. Reflecting on his circumstances, he speaks about his approach to making ends meet and implies a moral triumph in it. “You put a rich person

on the street, they're just going to a [soup] kitchen for food versus you put someone like me on the street who's been there, done it, and all that, I'm more than likely going to survive. They're more likely to not. Because they're used to throwing money to solve their problems versus I'm used to throwing my hands in."

Tony's approach is not a rejection of formal employment but an openness to all forms of working to get by. He even sees in it a pathway to more normative advancement. He views fixing up and selling cars as a way to saving the money to purchase a bar with his sister. He calculates that for each car he sells, he will earn \$3,500, and so he will need to sell twenty cars to save up the money he needs to buy a bar in cash, loan-free, in their rural area. As part of his imagined future, Tony figures he will "find the right woman" and settle down. He expects a future partner will "keep me in line," by which he means that she should hold him accountable to their financial obligations: "Like if I just want to go cruise around and spend my fifty bucks and they say, 'No, we have bills.'" So, although Tony pictures a traditional future with himself as the primary earner in a relationship and a nagging wife to keep him in line, he also sees that as compatible with his untraditional approach to earning. Notably, he does not view his current pursuits as stigmatizing—an excusable transgression on his way to living right—but as representing qualities he sees as admirable, such as doing whatever it takes to put together a life.

In contrast to Tony and Kevin, other men describe relying on their partners to be the primary earners in their relationships. Most often, this is not a wholesale reliance on a partner to provide all the household's income, but rather an organization of labor and earning that has the man working in a supporting role, breaking from the traditional gendered division of labor.

Grant has spent most of his life doing hard, physical labor on farms and small-scale construction projects, usually being paid under the table. At fifty years old and now in his third marriage, his body is beginning to tire. He worries that he will need vocational training if he wants to continue to work, an educational venture that he is not sure he can successfully tackle. Both he and his wife view themselves as

workers, but Grant sees the flexibility of his work situation as relying on the stability of his partner's formal employment and income.

We don't really struggle financially. I'm out there all the time. Some people can do, and some people can't. I have the ability to do it. So, I mean, some weeks are, you know, \$1,500 weeks. You know, some weeks are only \$400 or \$500. But you put it away, and when you need it, you use it. So, I'm not a materialist person. So, it's not like I need material things to make me feel good. . . . Her attitude is the same way as mine. She is more of a worker. She works full time, so she kind of holds more of the stability of it together. Times have changed in that, that some relationships are like that. It don't bother her. It don't bother me. You know, so, it works for us.

Grant recognizes here that traditional norms would dictate that his wife see him as falling short, and he speaks to these norms, explaining that these cultural tropes about men's and women's roles in unions do not hold sway in his relationship. It is not that he is unaware of the ideas implicit in the marriageable man hypothesis, but instead that he rejects them and believes his wife does, too.

Like Grant, other men speak similarly about how their partners do not mind being the primary earner. Jesse, in his forties, was working at a diner when he met his future spouse. He later suffered a series of knee injuries that sharply curtailed his ability to work a formal job. He now sees himself as contributing through his domestic labor while his wife works full time. He explicitly describes what he understands his role to be and his confidence that his partner is satisfied with the roles they each take. "She doesn't mind being the sole income winner, you know, because she sees beyond that to what I do, you know, that I'm a valued homemaker, you know." Jesse's homemaker role involves an array of traditionally masculine activities (like fixing things around the house and salvaging) in addition to traditionally feminine ones (cooking), as well as more gender-neutral tasks, such as growing much of their food in their garden.

Some men describe relying on their partners' resources even when their partners are not working. This includes couples relying on a partner's disability benefits. For example, Will, age fifty-two, has worked as a carpenter in a mix of payroll and cash jobs. Issues with his back and arms have led him to file for disability; while he waits for his claim to be adjudicated, he has worked only cash jobs because formal work could derail his claim. In the meantime, he and his wife of thirty-three years get by on a mix of her disability benefits and any cash he brings in from informal work. Although he presents himself as his own boss, he and his wife jointly decide whether cash jobs are worth the financial risks. For example, he complains about a job for which he had to front the cost of materials, only to see the client refuse to reimburse him. Because he was working under the table, he was left without legal recourse, and so, based on his wife's recommendation, he says, "I don't take nothing big anymore." Making ends meet is a shared venture for the couple and navigating the ins and outs of their finances is part of rather than a threat to their union.

A romantic relationship may also function as the gateway to informal work or exchange. This is the case for Lenny, forty-three, who lives with his girlfriend, her parents, and her grandparents. In his earlier life, Lenny describes having a well-paying job he enjoyed, a wife and three children, a boat, and all the trappings of a happy American life. His divorce, he says, stripped him of this dream. After a period of decline, he found himself without a job, in need of a place to stay, and behind on child support payments. His girlfriend's parents offered him room and board. In exchange, he does work around the house, which varies widely, from patching the roof to taking care of their animals. His relationship, then, gives him access to an informal exchange arrangement. As he sees it, "Right now, my girlfriend's family's pretty much helping me out, otherwise I'd be screwed, you know? I have nowhere to live, and I have nowhere to eat, you know? But I help them out. I do a lot of work around the place if they need something done." Lenny does not describe this as a permanent situation but also does not see it as threatening his relationship.

For him, the reciprocal nature of the arrangement offers some dignity.

Other men in the My Way group take a more extreme turn away from the formal economy and mainstream society. For example, Donny, a man in his mid-thirties with little formal work experience, sees himself and his girlfriend as modern homesteaders. They live in a trailer parked next to his parents' house in a remote, wooded area. From gardening, bow hunting, trapping, and bartering, they are self-reliant, he says. Donny describes his partner, whom he met while living in a homeless community, as sharing his vision for a life off the grid.

Although Donny is more extreme in distancing himself from mainstream society, we see across the men in the My Way group a greater willingness to depart from dominant norms around work and romantic partner roles than we see from the men in the Work First group. As is true for many of the men in the My Way group, a romantic relationship is the locus of resource provision and exchange for the couple. For men who see their work and partnerships as being conducted "my way," the form and formality of these arrangements often veers from traditional notions of men as primarily tasked with bringing home a paycheck through formal employment. In line with some previous research (Duneier 1999; Gowan 2010), we see that alternative forms of productivity can offer a positive sense of self. From this perspective, lacking formal work is not an endorsement of "sloth, idleness, and vices" (Eberstadt 2016, 5), but instead the pursuit of alternative productivity and the claims to worthiness that such efforts imply. Crucially, men who fit in this group portrayed the moral vision of their labor as congruent with the expectations of their romantic partners.

DISCUSSION

Over the past half century, the worlds of work and family have changed enormously, especially for men with less formal education (Breitwieser, Nunn, and Schambaugh 2018; Cherlin 2014). A growing portion of men are disconnected from the formal labor market, and researchers speculate that changing family roles may in part explain this trend (Binder and

Bound 2019). Simultaneously, family studies scholars have relied on less-educated men's increasingly poor financial position, and thus their absence from the pool of marriageable men, to explain declining marriage rates and to predict women avoiding or exiting unions with these men (Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2018). In this article, we examine the understanding disconnected men in nonmetropolitan areas have about how their workforce status conflicts with, comports with, or is unrelated to their role in a romantic union.

The overwhelming majority of men in this study endorsed work as a personally held moral imperative—they see themselves as workers, even if not as employees. Some depict their disconnection from employment as arising from constraints, whereas others portray it as an alternative track, another way of procuring resources for life. Despite this variation, men generally affirm the importance of productive activity in their lives. The major differences among them have to do with what they understand their disconnection from formal work to mean for fulfilling the expectations of a romantic union. Although a substantial minority of men—those in the Work First group—express the perspective expected by the marriageable man literature, the majority do not. Some see the relation between their work and partner roles as unrelated or Beside the Point; they often cite other factors that preclude employment and relationship success or demand their attention. Other men cite relationship obligations as engaging them in a Balancing Act between conflicting responsibilities, as well as those who draw on alternative means of fulfilling the provider role according to their own conceptions and standards—rejecting traditional norms to, instead, do it My Way.

These varying perspectives underline the need to recognize alternative ways men have of fulfilling roles in their relationships, particularly the resource provider role, which we find can go beyond formal employment. Thus scholars' reliance on measures of formal employment and formal earnings to assess work

effort and as the metrics of marriageability may be misleading, at least in nonmetropolitan settings. It is not that men do not value work, but that they do not always define and prioritize work in ways that have been the focus of research to date. In line with previous work (Duneier 1999; Gowan 2010), we see men deriving meaning and role fulfillment in alternative activities outside the formal labor market. Those writing and implementing policy can consider whether and how these forms of productivity and household contribution ought to be treated as fulfilling requirements for employment-contingent benefits, such as Medicaid or SNAP (Gomez et al. 2021; Waikar 2020); this could mean relaxing or eliminating work requirements for those deemed “able bodied adults without dependents”² or offering alternative activities outside the labor market that could fulfill requirements for work activities.

We see men navigating a complex connection between prevailing gender norms around work and romantic relationship roles. Those in the Work First group accept traditional norms and judge themselves (or feel judged by their partners) as failing by these standards. Those who see their work status as Beside the Point refrain from entering themselves in the “race” to be partner material; they have other concerns that displace or deprioritize a focus on romantic unions. Men in the Balancing Act and My Way groups are involved in alternative activities to formal work. However, whereas those in the My Way group see themselves as fulfilling their provider roles, those in the Balancing Act group view their alternative activities as preventing them from doing so, seeing the demands of relationships, which sometimes come intertwined with fatherhood roles, as being more essential than are the dictates of the male worker role. More flexible notions around gender and what it means to provide are both at play here. The men in the Balancing Act and the My Way groups do not conform to traditional gender role norms. It is not that they are unaware of these norms but rather that they do not accept the appropriateness of these norms to their relationships, or they reject the priori-

2. This category includes all working-age adults who are not on disability, regardless of their actual health, and can include parents if they do not have custody of a child.

tization of formal work above care work that these norms require. These more nuanced understandings of male roles in work and relationships, and their relative frequency compared to what would be expected by the traditional perspective, call into question the accuracy of the assumptions of the marriageable man hypothesis in previous research, at least for this nonmetropolitan setting and among disconnected men.

It is possible that these four groups could be found across geographic settings, but the nonmetropolitan setting may offer unique opportunities and constraints. For example, the options for alternative resource provision, beyond illicit pursuits, such as hunting, gardening, and bartering goods or services might be greater outside urban areas (Jensen, Tickamyer, and Slack 2019; Sherman 2021). Further, because both those inside and outside the formal labor market may undertake these activities, the acceptability and lack of stigma associated with them may make them uniquely suited to allowing men to feel they are fulfilling their economic obligations in their relationships, despite their lack of formal employment. Future research should explore these patterns in other settings.

This study is, of course, not without its limitations. First, we cannot generalize from this set of interviews, particularly across geographic areas and racial-ethnic groups; as Pamela Joshi and her colleagues (2022) discuss in this issue, work conditions vary substantially by race and ethnicity, and romantic union and employment patterns do as well (BLS 2019; Horowitz, Graf, and Livingston 2019). Nevertheless, the study suggests that future research should take a more expansive approach to understanding the ways in which men’s work and family roles are conceptualized and may interact, and future work can examine whether this pattern of findings is present in different regions or within different demographic groups. Second, because we capture only the perspectives of men, not of their partners, we do not know whether their understandings reflect their partners’ beliefs. Future research could include couple interviews to allow for comparison of each partner’s views. Third, because this is not a longitudinal study,

we do not know how stable these perspectives might be over time. The question remains whether men’s views change based on their stage in the life course, economic or romantic situations, length of time out of formal employment, and so on.

These findings have several implications for policy. First, policymakers should not rely on the idea that a return to higher marriage rates will propel men into the formal labor force. Although for some men, taking on the role and identity of husband may have this effect, as we see here, other obligations can trump men’s economic provider role or couples may accept men as fulfilling the expectation to contribute resources through alternate means (such as cash work, bartering, or self-provisioning). Second, policymakers might focus on pathways and incentives to formalize the existing productivity of these men, who may feel that current policies denigrate their morally upright, partnership-sanctioned efforts; such efforts could include, for example, excluding family caregivers from work requirements to qualify for assistance programs. This approach follows from calls to treat with dignity, rather than regard with suspicion, those with lower incomes applying for government assistance (Edin, Shaefer, and Tach 2017). Considerable focus has been on making public benefit receipt contingent on work, take SNAP, for example (Mead 2012; Waikar 2020). This includes in recent debates about the continuation of the expanded Child Tax Credit. Senator Manchin’s statement that “people should make some effort” if they want to receive any support is one example. Such requirements necessarily exclude men—such as those in the Balancing Act and My Way groups—who are engaged in a wide variety of activities that contribute to their families but do not count as formal employment. Currently, policy is written to not count these activities as “some effort,” which treats people as undeserving, despite the array of ways in which they provide for their families.

Third, although the availability of better jobs would draw some of the men we interviewed into the formal labor force, it would not draw a substantial portion of them. Many in our sample struggle with work-limiting health issues—just over half described having mental

or physical health issues and nearly one-quarter described having addiction issues, which means that they are often unable to work formal jobs even if they want to do so. Physical and mental health issues can make it challenging for some people to be reliable employees, at least without accommodations. Because the disability claims process can take so long, and yet requires people to show that they have extremely limited earnings (Autor et al. 2015), we see men engaging in under-the-table work, as opportunities arise and their health conditions allow, while they wait for a disability claim to come through. Because the process is so arduous to navigate in the first place, men are reluctant to pursue formal employment once they receive disability, for fear that a reoccurrence of their health issues would push them out of the job, starting them down an unstable, under-resourced path once again. This concern suggests the need for a more dignified process that recognizes the difficulties applicants face. Easier access to jobs for less-educated men that offer the flexibility to accommodate a variety of health limitations could help keep some men in the formal labor force and limit the support they require from disability benefits.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for the economy have meant a steep drop in the labor-force participation rate. It remains to be seen whether and how quickly the economy will rebound, pulling those shed from the labor force's ranks back in. After the Great Recession, it took more than a decade before labor-force participation rates rebounded. Some economists speculate that the post-pandemic economy will be permanently altered with particular realignments at the low-wage end of the labor market (Guilford and Cambon 2020). The issues we raise here are thus likely to be a presence for more men and more families across the United States; these insights could and ideally will inform policy discussions about what direction to go in reinstating and strengthening work requirements for various support policies, such as SNAP, Medicaid, and the Child Tax Credit. For research, a narrow focus on the wages or annual income that come with formal employment, for example, ignores the multifaceted way many men see themselves as contributing to

their romantic partnerships through their care work and their alternative ways of providing for their families. To fully understand how economic events and conditions spill over into relationship formation, stability, and dissolution, scholars need to recognize the more complex and comprehensive set of roles that prime-age men are navigating around economic provision and romantic partnership.

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