

American factories are already having difficulty filling jobs, and not because of trade policy.



LIFE SCIENCE

A Good Man for U.S. Manufacturing Is Hard to Find

President Trump proclaims his tariffs will bring manufacturing jobs back to the U.S. Good luck finding workers to fill them. A common lament among employers, especially manufacturers, is they can't find reliable, conscientious workers who can pass a drug test. Single women might commiserate: A good worker, like a good man, can be hard to find these days.

Blame government, which showers benefits on able-bodied people who don't work while at the same time subsidizing college degrees that don't lead to productive employment. The result is millions of idle men and millions of unfilled jobs—what an economist would call a deadweight loss to society.

Forty percent of small business owners in March reported job openings they couldn't fill, with larger shares in construction (56%), transportation (53%) and manufacturing (47%), according to last week's National Federation of Independent Business survey. The Labor Department's Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey of businesses tells a similar story. There are twice as many job openings in manufacturing than in the mid-2000s as a share of employment. Save for during the pandemic, America's worker shortage is the worst in 50 years.

Decades ago, productivity-enhancing technology and, yes, inexpensive imports caused men who worked on shop floors to lose their jobs and drop out of the workforce. But this generation is sailing into the sunset, and there are many fewer young Americans who want to work in factories.

The labor force participation rate among working-age men is now about five percentage points lower than in the early 1980s. As a result, there are about 3.5 million fewer men between the ages of 25 and 54 in the workforce, and 1.3 million between the ages of 25 and 34, than there would have been were it not for this decline.

Labor participation among working-age women, on the other hand, recently hit a record, in part because they are having fewer children (which is related to their difficulties in finding suitable mates). At the risk of stereotyping, women are more inclined toward "helping" professions—such as services—than those that require physical labor.

So where have all the good working men gone? Some are subsisting on government benefits or living off their parents. About 17% of workingage men are on Medicaid, 7.4% on

food stamps and 6.3% on Social Security (many claiming disability payouts), according to the Census Bureau. Many spend their days playing videogames and day-trading.

Friends say they've seen young men on dating apps claim to be working as self-employed traders, financial bloggers and even a "retired financial engineer"—apparent euphemisms for "Robinhood bros" who speculate on stocks and share tips on Reddit. When stocks were booming, many didn't have to work in the traditional sense. After last week's plunge, they might.

Other missing men are taking longer to finish college or are pursuing graduate degrees. Only about 41% of men complete a bachelor's degree in four years, and about a quarter take more than six. Many high-paying vocations don't require college degrees, but government subsidies and public K-12 schools nonetheless steer high-school students to that track.

Federal student loans won't pay for apprenticeships, but they will cover the cost (including living expenses) of worthless graduate degrees in community organizing, creative writing, tourism, dance and more. Rarely does one need an advanced degree to enter such fields, but colleges have convinced Americans they do as a means of raking in more federal dollars. *

Many millennials and Gen Z "zoomers" struggle to find jobs in their chosen fields of study and don't want to work in others—or in jobs they view as beneath them. So some simply don't work.

Consider: The unemployment rate among recent college grads with a sociology degree is 6.7% and their median wage is \$45,000, according to the New York Federal Reserve Bank. Sociology grads could earn twice as much working on an auto assembly line, which pays on average \$100,000 a year. Good gig, but not many want it.

The reality is that masses of young people, who have been taught that capitalism is exploitative, don't want to work in factories. They'd rather mooch off taxpayers or their parents.

Still, many men who don't go to college also don't want to work in factories or other blue-collar occupations, perhaps because they don't believe there's dignity in such jobs. Only 31% of blue-collar workers feel that their type of work is respected, according to a Pew Research Center survey last week.

Any wonder when politicians in both parties proclaim such workers are exploited? There's dignity in any work, a message that deserves to be emphasized by the president. The decline in work among young men is a far bigger problem for the nation's economic and cultural vitality than the decline in manufacturing jobs. It can't and won't be solved with tariffs.

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