Unmistakably, a pillar of our society is work. Not only does it supply income that enables families to thrive, but also it fosters a sense of pride and belonging that few other institutions can provide. For these reasons, it is no surprise that the vast majority of prime-age Americans work for pay. Even so, it is no secret that labor force participation rates among prime-age workers have declined over the past two decades, suggesting that America is facing a work problem.

If not working is a choice, then it may be of little concern to public policy. But when a lack of employment leads to poverty, it raises important questions about the role for government. In many ways, government can make poverty less painful through income transfers, but the important question is whether government can encourage those who are not employed to work and provide for themselves. This paper explores work among America’s poor with a particular focus on the reasons people give for not working and what public policy can do to address them.

An often overlooked fact is that the majority of working-age people in poverty do not work at all for pay, and this pattern has become more entrenched over time. When describing poverty, low wages are often highlighted, but according to the US Census Bureau, more than 60 percent of poor working-age Americans in official poverty did not work at all in 2014. Even accounting for all government benefits via the supplemental poverty measure, 58.3 percent of poor working-age people did not work at all in 2014.

Efforts to boost wages at the low end may have some effect on poverty, but if we are to reduce it in any meaningful way, changes in policy will need to address the reality that too few poor Americans work. Failing to acknowledge this fact presents other less-than-ideal options. We can either accept the status quo, which would mean leaving millions of...
Americans in poverty, or continue funding large government programs that transfer income from working taxpayers to the nonworking poor.

This paper attempts to address this issue by focusing on the population of Americans who are poor, meaning they have income below a certain threshold established by the federal government. For the most part, it focuses on those determined to be poor using the official definition of poverty. While some argue that the official measure is meaningless because it does not count all resources available to households (for example, food assistance benefits and tax-based transfers such as the earned income tax credit), the focus here is intended to offer a better understanding of who is poor before factoring in these government benefits.

But it is true that the supplemental poverty measure, which factors in all government benefits and uses a different threshold, gives us a better sense of who remains poor even after government assistance is considered. For this reason, where appropriate, people who are poor according to the supplemental poverty measure were also explored. Ultimately, the results related to work and nonwork for people in poverty according to both measures were similar, and the conclusions were the same.

The results suggest that efforts to increase employment among America’s poor could be a larger component of antipoverty efforts, but that this must involve addressing health issues and family responsibilities more broadly. The results also raise concerns about the potential work disincentives built into existing public benefit programs, such as disability assistance. Notably, fewer than 10 percent of nonworkers in poverty reported inability to find work as their reason for not working. This suggests that current economic and workforce development policies, which primarily focus on people already working or looking for work, have limitations. With over 60 percent of poor working-age people not working at all, public policies aimed at increasing work may have stronger effects than these other policies.

Poverty and Work

Admittedly, work does not always bring families out of poverty. US Census data show that more than 5 million American families with at least one worker lived in official poverty in 2014. But work is important for many reasons beyond the paycheck it garners. Work, in the sense of economically gainful employment, promotes responsibility and personal investment in society. In the words of President Barack Obama, work provides “structure and dignity and a sense of connection to community.”

Work certainly offers the best chance to escape poverty and to move up the income ladder without being dependent on government. The US Census Bureau shows that only 3 percent of working-age adults who worked full-time in 2014 were in poverty, using the official measure. When work supports are considered, such as the earned income tax credit and food assistance, working families can receive even more.

But who are the nonworking poor? Can they work, or are there insurmountable obstacles to this? The following examines data from the US Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) and primarily focuses on people in poverty according to the official measure, with some additional analysis using the supplemental poverty measure (see inlet).

Poverty Measurement

This analysis primarily focuses on people in poverty according to the official poverty measure. In 2014 (the most recent year for which data are available), 46.7 million Americans were in poverty according to the official measure. The official poverty measure excludes noncash government benefits and tax transfers from its calculation (e.g., SNAP, EITC, housing assistance). Therefore, it largely reflects the income one makes from working, as well as cash-based government benefits. The official poverty measure is relevant for this analysis because it identifies people in poverty who lack market income, which reveals the extent to which they can escape poverty without a lot of government help.

However, information about those who are in poverty according to the supplemental measure—which factors in noncash government benefits—and about their work status can also be instructive, because it reflects the situation of people who remain in poverty even after receiving government help. Where appropriate, the supplemental poverty measure (as calculated by the Census Bureau) is also included.
People in Poverty and Their Work Status. In 2014, 61.7 percent of all working-age people (age 18–64) in official poverty did not work, and another 26.6 percent worked part-time or only part of the year. In other words, the vast majority of working-age people in poverty did not have full-time work (Figure 1). The supplemental poverty measure revealed the same. Table A1 shows that in 2014, 58.3 percent of working-age people in poverty according to the supplemental measure did not work at all, and 27.6 percent worked less than full-time, full-year.

Low work rates also affect children. Almost one-third of all people in poverty are children, who obviously cannot work, but most of them reside with working-age parents. When considering all 46.7 million people in official poverty in 2014 (including children and the elderly), nonworking adults of working age and their children made up 45.2 percent of this total. Another 26.7 percent worked less than full-time or were children who lived with someone who worked less than full-time (Figure 2). This means that not working or working less than full-time accounted for almost 72 percent of all people in poverty in 2014. Only 17 percent of those in poverty were either full-time workers or their children, and the remaining 10.7 percent were the elderly (Figure 2).

Table A2 shows the same using the supplemental poverty measure. Fewer children are in poverty using the supplemental measure, which shifts the percentages slightly, but the overall pattern is the same: part-time or nonexistent work accounted for the vast majority of cases of poverty among working-age people and their children.

Trends in Nonwork over Time. According to the official poverty measure, the retreat from work has worsened over time. In 1995, just over half of working-age people in poverty did not work, with 49 percent working at least part-time. By 2014, the nonwork rate was nearly 11 percentage points higher, and only 38 percent of poor people worked at least part-time (Figure 3). The trend away from work has consistently risen, with little fluctuation based on the business cycle (Figure 3).

To put it another way, official poverty actually increased from 1995 to 2014, while work levels declined. If poverty had declined overall, nonworkers might be expected to make up a larger share of those in poverty, as they would be less likely to exit poverty than workers. But, as shown in Figure 3, poverty and nonwork rates both increased over this time. While more working-age people have entered official poverty, more are also not working.

The trend toward not working among those living in poverty mirrors the decline in labor force participation among the population as a whole. According
Figure 2. People in Official Poverty in the United States by Work Status


Figure 3. People in Official Poverty by Work Status in the Prior Year, 1995–2014, Age 18–64

to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the percentage of people age 16 and older working or looking for work has steadily declined since the late 1990s. In 1997, the labor force participation rate was 67 percent in the average month. In 2015, it was just under 63 percent.\(^8\) Research suggests that this retreat from work is largely due to structural or demographic factors, such as an aging population and more young adults in school.\(^9\) But even among the working-age population, labor force participation has declined, especially for men. In 1990, 91.6 percent of men 25 to 59 years old were in the labor force; in 2014, only 86.3 percent were.\(^10\)

It is possible that this broader retreat from work and the underlying factors causing it have resulted in more people living in poverty, while shifting the composition of those in poverty to include more nonworkers than workers. But demographic factors cannot entirely explain the increase in nonwork among those in poverty. The elderly make up roughly the same share of those in poverty today as they did in the late 1990s (approximately 10 percent), and nonwork has increased primarily among the working-age population in poverty (Figure 2). Both trends suggest that factors beyond the increasing elderly and student populations are causing work declines among those in poverty.

So what is causing these low work rates, and how many nonworkers are capable of work? Some strong indications can be found in the reasons people give for not working.

**Reasons People in Official Poverty Do Not Work**

The Current Population Survey asks all respondents age 16 or older who reported no employment in the previous year the primary reason why they did not work. The circumstances that surround the reasons for not working are unknown, and the analysis below should be interpreted with this in mind. For example, someone may have looked for work and then given up, citing health issues as the reason.

The analysis reflects self-reported reasons for not working only at the time of the survey and focuses on those who are working age (18–64). It also largely reflects people classified as poor according to the official measure. Although fewer children and more working-age people are in poverty according to the supplemental measure, the results varied little when considering the official versus the supplemental measure.

The reasons for not working among people in official poverty largely fell into two categories: either being ill or disabled, or taking care of home or family. These were followed by going to school (combined with “other” in Figure 4), being retired, and not being able to find work. Over time, the two largest reasons for not working remained the most common (Figure 4).

Not surprisingly, the percentage of nonworkers citing inability to find work changed with the business cycle. Still, this cohort reflects a small share of the total. Also, even though home and family reasons remain one of the most common rationales for not working, the share of working-age adults citing this reason has declined slowly since 1995, particularly over the last 10 years (Figure 4). However, despite these fluctuations, the main reasons people in poverty cited for not working have remained consistent for roughly the past 20 years.

In 2014, consistent with past years, illness or disability was the most common reason for not working among nonworkers in poverty, followed by taking care of home/family (Figure 5). Going to school was also a relatively common reason, with inability to find work being the least common (except for “other”). This suggests that many nonworkers in poverty (18–64) are not actively looking for work (Figure 5).

Examining a prime working-age population (age 25–59) in poverty revealed similar overall reasons for not working, with important differences by gender. For prime-age men, not working because of illness or disability was the most common reason, but inability to find work was the second most common, at 16.6 percent. For prime-age women, home/family was the most common reason (42.9 percent), followed by illness or disability. Only 7.3 percent of prime-age women cited inability to find work as the reason for not working (Figure 6).

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of nonworkers in poverty in 2014 (18–64 years old) by gender and by the reason given for not working. By combining these characteristics with some details of the key findings, this section of the analysis seeks to offer insight into the situations of nonworkers living in poverty.

**Being Ill or Disabled.** The most common reason that working-age people in poverty gave for not working in 2014 was that they were ill or disabled. Slightly more than half of those in this group were female (53.3 percent), and four out of five were over age 35, with almost one-third 55–64 years old (Table 1). Given
Figure 4. People in Official Poverty with No Work in Prior Year by Reason, 1995–2014, Age 18–64


Figure 5. People in Official Poverty with No Work in Prior Year by Reason, Age 18–64


Note: n = 16.3 million.
the age profile of this group, it was not surprising that
75 percent did not have children under age 18 living
in the household (Table 1). Most also did not have a
full-time worker in the household (97 percent), and
three-fourths were unmarried (Table 1).

In terms of health status, 39.2 percent of this
group received disability-related income (compared
to 6.9 percent of the working-age population as
a whole), including workers’ compensation, Sup-
plemental Security Income (SSI), SSDI, or veter-
an’s benefits (Table 1), suggesting a few possible
scenarios. Many of the responders may not have a
condition that meets the requirements for federal
disability; many may not have applied for disability
assistance; or the survey may have failed to fully
reflect disability-related income. Research shows that
underreporting of government benefits, including
disability-related assistance such as SSI, is a prob-
lem—suggesting that more respondents may receive
disability-related income not reflected here.11

Another way to assess health status was from
self-reported health measures. Almost 70 percent of
respondents reported their health as fair or poor, and
many also reported that they had a disability that
prevented or limited work (83.9 percent). These findings
suggest that work (at least without treatment) was
difficult for people who reported poor health, even
if many of these did not report receiving federal
disability-related payments (Figure 7).

Taking Care of Home or Family. The second largest
group of nonworkers in official poverty cited taking care
of home or family as the reason for not working. Among
this cohort, 62.7 percent had children in the household;
32.3 percent had a child under five (Table 1). Most were
women (86 percent), and 48 percent were married
(Table 1).

The presence of a full-time worker in the house-
hold, whether a spouse or unmarried partner, might
explain why some working-age adults do not work
for home or family reasons. However, the income of
unmarried domestic partners is not considered in the
official poverty measure. Official poverty is based on
family income (with “family” defined as any related
individuals through blood, marriage, or adoption).
Unmarried individuals are not considered family, sug-
 gesting that those who live with an unmarried partner
may not be living in official poverty once the income
of the other adult is considered.

Figure 6. Prime-Age Nonworkers in Official Poverty by Reason and Gender, Age 25–59

![Figure 6. Prime-Age Nonworkers in Official Poverty by Reason and Gender, Age 25–59](chart)

Note: n = 11.1 million.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Not Working</th>
<th>Could Not Find Work</th>
<th>Ill or Disabled</th>
<th>Taking Care of Home/Family</th>
<th>Going to School</th>
<th>Retired</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,610,424</td>
<td>5,215,853</td>
<td>4,110,032</td>
<td>2,927,518</td>
<td>1,695,540</td>
<td>812,891</td>
<td>16,372,258</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>647,223</td>
<td>2,780,862</td>
<td>3,553,495</td>
<td>1,381,677</td>
<td>947,416</td>
<td>336,737</td>
<td>9,647,410</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>963,201</td>
<td>2,434,991</td>
<td>556,536</td>
<td>1,545,841</td>
<td>748,125</td>
<td>476,154</td>
<td>6,724,848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–24</td>
<td>313,647</td>
<td>227,887</td>
<td>582,652</td>
<td>1,959,221</td>
<td>64,154</td>
<td>228,001</td>
<td>3,375,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34</td>
<td>368,408</td>
<td>608,612</td>
<td>1,424,395</td>
<td>682,651</td>
<td>91,916</td>
<td>241,353</td>
<td>3,417,334</td>
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<tr>
<td>35–54</td>
<td>664,414</td>
<td>2,579,704</td>
<td>1,778,377</td>
<td>256,673</td>
<td>286,294</td>
<td>261,811</td>
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<td>55–64</td>
<td>263,955</td>
<td>1,799,651</td>
<td>324,607</td>
<td>28,973</td>
<td>1,253,177</td>
<td>81,727</td>
<td>3,752,089</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>411,225</td>
<td>1,372,804</td>
<td>1,995,879</td>
<td>274,222</td>
<td>878,531</td>
<td>244,648</td>
<td>5,177,309</td>
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<tr>
<td>Previously Married</td>
<td>317,695</td>
<td>1,609,959</td>
<td>526,124</td>
<td>109,629</td>
<td>525,630</td>
<td>90,578</td>
<td>3,179,614</td>
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<tr>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>881,504</td>
<td>2,233,091</td>
<td>1,588,028</td>
<td>2,543,667</td>
<td>291,380</td>
<td>477,665</td>
<td>8,015,335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Children (Under 18) in Household</td>
<td>434,524</td>
<td>1,230,323</td>
<td>2,576,948</td>
<td>320,083</td>
<td>265,571</td>
<td>118,956</td>
<td>4,946,405</td>
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<tr>
<td>Without Children in Household</td>
<td>1,175,900</td>
<td>3,985,531</td>
<td>1,533,084</td>
<td>2,607,435</td>
<td>1,429,970</td>
<td>693,935</td>
<td>11,425,853</td>
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<tr>
<td>With Child Under Five in Household</td>
<td>126,071</td>
<td>203,892</td>
<td>1,327,521</td>
<td>141,347</td>
<td>25,383</td>
<td>49,044</td>
<td>1,873,259</td>
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<tr>
<td>With No Full-Time Worker in Family</td>
<td>1,512,082</td>
<td>5,063,159</td>
<td>3,221,842</td>
<td>2,518,725</td>
<td>1,635,641</td>
<td>769,951</td>
<td>14,721,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Full-Time Worker in Family</td>
<td>98,342</td>
<td>152,695</td>
<td>888,189</td>
<td>408,793</td>
<td>59,899</td>
<td>42,940</td>
<td>1,650,858</td>
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<tr>
<td>With No Full-Time Worker in Household</td>
<td>1,299,961.7</td>
<td>4,580,603</td>
<td>2,507,326</td>
<td>2,030,817.8</td>
<td>1,544,275</td>
<td>628,941.9</td>
<td>12,591,926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Full-Time Worker in Household</td>
<td>310,462</td>
<td>635,250</td>
<td>1,602,706</td>
<td>896,700</td>
<td>151,264</td>
<td>183,949</td>
<td>3,780,332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With No Disabled or Elderly Person in Household</td>
<td>1,081,610</td>
<td>602,644</td>
<td>3,274,271</td>
<td>2,428,107</td>
<td>1,119,207</td>
<td>663,098</td>
<td>9,168,937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Disabled or Elderly Person in Household</td>
<td>528,814</td>
<td>4,613,210</td>
<td>835,761</td>
<td>499,412</td>
<td>576,333</td>
<td>149,793</td>
<td>7,203,321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With No Disability-Related Income</td>
<td>1,562,012</td>
<td>3,171,940</td>
<td>3,990,234</td>
<td>2,902,578</td>
<td>1,615,437</td>
<td>800,887</td>
<td>14,043,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Disability-Related Income</td>
<td>48,411</td>
<td>2,043,914</td>
<td>119,797</td>
<td>24,940</td>
<td>80,103</td>
<td>12,004</td>
<td>2,329,169</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Children (Duplicated)</td>
<td>578,857</td>
<td>1,488,382</td>
<td>2,769,938</td>
<td>1,583,422</td>
<td>388,528</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6,809,127</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher Household Than Family Income</td>
<td>495,845</td>
<td>1,201,522</td>
<td>1,282,972</td>
<td>1,107,170</td>
<td>199,210</td>
<td>262,105</td>
<td>4,548,825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried Partner in Household</td>
<td>304,681.98</td>
<td>712,649.90</td>
<td>926,518.22</td>
<td>332,554</td>
<td>114,824.08</td>
<td>128,718.08</td>
<td>2,519,946</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Characteristics of Nonworkers in Official Poverty by Reason for Not Working (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Could Not Find Work</th>
<th>Ill or Disabled</th>
<th>Taking Care of Home/Family</th>
<th>Going to School</th>
<th>Retired</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td>86.5%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>59.8%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
<td>44.1%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–24</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>66.9%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>34.7%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–54</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55–64</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previously Married</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>86.9%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Children (Under 18)</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without Children in Household</td>
<td>73.0%</td>
<td>76.4%</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
<td>89.1%</td>
<td>84.3%</td>
<td>85.4%</td>
<td>69.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Child Under Five</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With No Full-Time Worker</td>
<td>93.9%</td>
<td>97.1%</td>
<td>78.4%</td>
<td>86.0%</td>
<td>96.5%</td>
<td>94.7%</td>
<td>89.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Family</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With No Full-Time Worker</td>
<td>80.7%</td>
<td>87.8%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>69.4%</td>
<td>91.1%</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Household</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With No Disabled Person</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>79.7%</td>
<td>82.9%</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>81.6%</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Household</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>88.4%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With No Disability-Related Income</td>
<td>97.0%</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
<td>97.1%</td>
<td>99.1%</td>
<td>95.3%</td>
<td>98.5%</td>
<td>85.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Disability-Related Income</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Household Than</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Income</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among working-age people in poverty who cited taking care of home or family as the reason for not working, 22.5 percent had an unmarried partner in the household, and almost one-third (31 percent) had household income (which does factor in the income of an unmarried partner) that was higher than family income (Table 1). Combining the share living with an unmarried partner (22.5 percent) with the percentage of married families from Table 1 (48.6 percent) revealed that almost 70 percent of people not working for home/family reasons and living in poverty had a spouse or partner in the household.

However, the presence of a spouse or partner did not necessarily translate into having a full-time worker in the household. Figure 8 shows that 21.4 percent of the home/family cohort were married with a full-time worker in the household, with smaller percentages of never-married and previously married respondents also living with a full-time worker (Figure 8). In total, this meant that only 39 percent of people in poverty not working for home/family reasons were living with a full-time worker (Figure 8).

The supplemental poverty measure does include the income of an unmarried partner in the calculation of poverty. As previously mentioned, the supplemental measure changes the makeup of the population living in poverty to include slightly more married couples and fewer never-married couples. However, even under the supplemental measure, few people not working for family reasons lived with a full-time worker in the household.

Table A3 shows that when considering those in poverty according to the supplemental measure (which includes all government benefits, a different threshold, and the income of unmarried partners), 29.8 percent of nonworkers for home/family reasons lived with a full-time worker, compared to 39 percent when considering those in official poverty. This means that according to both measures, less than 40 percent of those who were poor and stayed out of the workforce for home/family reasons also lived with a full-time worker.

Caring for a disabled household member is another possible home- or family-related reason...
why working-age adults in poverty might stay out of the labor force. Table 1 shows that approximately 20 percent of people living in official poverty who cited home or family as the reason for not working lived with a disabled household member. Figure 9 combines this with full-time workers and shows that almost 43.6 percent of this group had no full-time worker and no disabled person in the household (Figure 9).

Going to School or Retired. A smaller share of non-workers in official poverty (17.9 percent) reported that they were not working because they were going to school, and another 10.4 percent indicated that they were retired (Figure 5). Unsurprisingly, these nonworkers fit a certain profile.

Those not working because of school attendance were overwhelmingly childless and young. Only 10 percent had children under 18 in the household; 67 percent were under 25 years old, and 90 percent were under 35 (Table 1). Almost 14 percent lived with a full-time worker in the household, which could have been a romantic partner, roommate, or other unrelated adult (Table 1). Approximately 38 percent lived in a household with higher income than their family income, suggesting that they were living with unrelated adults, such as roommates or unmarried partners, who had resources (Table 1).

Nonworkers in poverty who reported being retired were mostly over age 55 (74 percent), with no children in the household (84 percent). Slightly more than half were married (51 percent). However, only 3.5 percent had a full-time worker in the household, and 34 percent had a disabled person in the household (Table 1). This suggests that many who were both poor and retired possibly lived with a retired or disabled spouse or partner.

Could Not Find Work. Only 9.8 percent of nonworkers in official poverty (18–64 years old) indicated that they were not working because they could not find work, suggesting that actively seeking work but not finding it explains only a small percentage of cases of poverty (Figure 5). This situation differed little by

Figure 8. Nonworkers for Home/Family Reasons in Official Poverty by Marital Status and Presence of Full-Time Workers in Household, Age 18–64

Note: n = 4.1 million.
Young adults (age 18–24) made up approximately 20 percent of nonworkers in poverty because they could not find work, with another 22.9 percent age 25–34 and 41.3 percent age 35–54 (Table 1).

Beyond age, these nonworkers fit a particular profile. Almost 60 percent were male, 73 percent did not have children under 18 years old in the household, and approximately 75 percent were unmarried (Table 1). This strongly suggests that those in official poverty because they could not find work were mostly single individuals across ages without children.

**Out-of-School and Nonworking Men.** Although inability to find work was a relatively uncommon reason for not working overall, it was more common among particular groups. Men, particularly young minority men, have received attention in recent years because of their declining labor force participation and high levels of unemployment. According to a recent study, 32 percent of black, non-Hispanic men age 20–24 in the United States were out of work and not in school in 2014.12

Focusing on disconnected men (not working and not in school) who were poor in 2014 revealed that 35 percent of 18- to 24-year-old men indicated that they could not find work (Figure 10). Another 21.2 percent identified an illness or disability, and 26.7 percent indicated “other” as the reason for not working. Unfortunately, it is unclear what “other” means from the survey data. It is possible that members of the “other” group have given up on looking for work or are doing other nonwork-related activities or informal work. Overall, the data suggest that a lack of jobs for these young men is a problem, but that other factors, including health-related problems, still play a large role.

A large share of 25- to 35-year-old disconnected men living in poverty also indicated that they could not find work (25.6 percent), but 34 percent indicated that an illness or disability prevented work, and another 21.4 percent were not working for home/family reasons (Figure 10). The patterns for older men were expectedly different. The largest share of 35- to 54-year-old disconnected men in poverty cited being ill or disabled as their reason for not working.

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**Figure 9. Nonworkers for Home/Family Reasons in Official Poverty by Full-Time Workers or Disabled Persons in Household, Age 18–64**

![Figure 9](image-url)


Note: Reflects unmarried partners and other unrelated adults in the household. n = 4.1 million.
Figure 10. Nonworking Men in Poverty and Not in School by Age and Reason for Not Working, Age 18–64

Note: n = 5.2 million.

Figure 11. Nonworking Men in Poverty and Not in School by Race and Education Level, Age 18–64

Note: n = 15.4 million.
(56.9 percent), as did 49.9 percent of 55- to 64-year-old disconnected men in poverty, with 34.4 percent not working due to retirement (Figure 10).

Just over half (50.6 percent) of nonworking men in poverty who were not in school were white non-Hispanic, with 21.6 percent black non-Hispanic and 20.4 percent Hispanic. The remaining were of another race or multiple races. Because the sample size was small, it was necessary to pool three years of data together to explore nonworking, nonstudent men in more detail. Among this cohort, white men were slightly better educated than black and Hispanic men, with Hispanic men the least educated (Figure 11).

A higher percentage of black men and men of Hispanic background identified not working because they could not find a job compared to white men (Figure 12). Not working for retirement reasons was more common among white men than other race/ethnic groups, and being ill or disabled was equally common among white and black men (Figure 12).

It is possible that education level played a role in the reasons for not working. A larger percentage of black and Hispanic men cited the inability to find work; a larger percentage also had less than a high school education, and fewer overall had some college. There may be some correlation. Unfortunately, the sample sizes were too small to explore this possibility in more detail. What we can identify is that it was slightly more common for black and Hispanic men who were neither working nor in school to cite “could not find a job” as the reason for not working (Figure 12).

**How Nonwork Affects Children and Total Poverty**

Now that the reasons for not working among working-age Americans in poverty are better understood, this section explores how nonwork affects children and how it relates to poverty overall. As shown in Figure 13, 32.8 percent of children in poverty lived with at least one full-time worker, another...
35.9 percent lived with a part-time worker (but no full-time worker), and 31.3 percent lived in a family with no workers.

Although work is common in families with children, less than full-time work among the adults in the family still explained the majority (67.2 percent) of children living in official poverty in 2014 (Figure 13). Although full-time work does not necessarily translate into above-poverty income—given that 32.8 percent of children were in poverty even though a full-time worker was in their family—full-time work offers the best path toward higher income, especially when factoring in work-related benefits for families with children, such as the earned income tax credit. In fact, in 2014, 36.1 percent of children who lived with a working-age adult in poverty according to the official measure were not in poverty when using the supplemental measure.13

Exploring the reasons for not working among adults living with children in official poverty revealed that “taking care of home or family” covered the most children (Figure 14). “Going to school” accounted for 33.4 percent of children in official poverty who lived with a nonworker, and only 12.2 percent of children in poverty were in a family where the nonworker cited “could not find work” as the reason for not working (Figure 14).

Figure 15 shows that nonwork still accounted for the largest share of all people in poverty (57.8 percent), when factoring in the elderly and counting children by the work status of caregivers. “Taking care of home and family” explained the largest portion of nonworking adults and children in official poverty, accounting for 14.1 percent of all people in poverty. Another 13.8 percent were in poverty because an illness or disability prevented work. Together, these two reasons accounted for 27.9 percent of all people in official poverty.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The vast majority of working-age adults in poverty, whether measured by the official rate or the supplemental rate, lack full-time work, and more than 60 percent in official poverty did not work for pay at all in 2014. In addition, the majority of children in official poverty were in a family without a full-time worker, and 31.3 percent were in a family with no working adult at all.

Two reasons accounted for the majority of nonworking, working-age poor adults (and their children) in 2014: health issues and home/family responsibilities. Looking for, but not finding, work accounted for only a small share. Illness or disability was the most common reason, and unsurprisingly, older adults and those without children were concentrated in this group. Home or family responsibilities was the second most common reason; the majority of respondents...
Figure 14. Children in Official Poverty Living with Nonworking Adults by Reason for Not Working

Note: Does not equal 100 percent because children could be living with more than one nonworking adult. \( n = 4.7 \) million children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Not Working</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taking Care of Home/Family</td>
<td>58.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to School</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ill or Disabled</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could Not Find Work</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 15. All People in Official Poverty by Work Status (or Work Status of Adult in Family), 2014

Note: Children are reflected by the status of the adults in the household. If multiple adults were in a household, children are reflected by highest work effort, but are double-counted in reasons for not working. \( n = 46.7 \) million.

- Full-Time, Full-Year Work: 16.5%
- No Work: 57.9%
- Partial Work: 25.6%
- Other: 1.7%
- Retired: 4.3%
- Could Not Find Work: 4.5%
- In School: 9.3%
- Elderly: 10.3%
- Ill/Disabled: 13.8%
- Home/Family: 14.1%
citing this reason were women with children in the household. Almost 70 percent also had a spouse or unmarried partner in the household, but only 39 percent had a full-time worker in the household.

Those who reported being unable to find work accounted for only 9.8 percent of nonworking adults in official poverty and for 12.2 percent of poor children living with a nonworking adult. It is possible that those who cited illness, disability, or family responsibilities as reasons for not working had unsuccessfully looked for work in the past, but this finding suggests that, at least at the time of the survey, the vast majority of nonworking people in poverty were not presently looking for work.

While full-time work does not always lead a family out of poverty, work offers one of the best paths. Important policy implications emerge when considering these findings. Antipoverty policies—such as minimum wage increases, wage subsidies, increasing job availability (including subsidized jobs), and workforce development efforts like education and training—often focus on the working poor or on those actively searching for work. Efforts like these are not well-suited to those who are not even looking for work.

As the above analysis suggests, most working-age adults in poverty are not working for reasons unrelated to searching for work. Policies that do not address the central reasons keeping working-age adults in poverty out of the workforce—namely, health issues and home/family responsibilities—may do some good, but their impact on poverty is likely to remain limited. Different strategies are needed to reach the almost 30 percent of all poor people (and their children) who do not work at all for health or family reasons (Figure 15).

Policy responses aimed at the nonworking poor include the following:

1. **Reforms to health care and disability assistance programs to get more poor people with health issues working.** Experts have proposed some possible policy responses, such as reducing work disincentives in disability assistance programs, initiating programs that are aimed at getting people back to work before receiving assistance, and building public policies that recognize that disabilities and health conditions can change.14

2. **Incentives in the American health system to encourage behaviors that keep people healthy enough to work.** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the most commonly reported disabilities are mobility-related, meaning difficulties walking or climbing stairs. Many of those who report disabilities also report unhealthy behaviors such as smoking and inactivity.15 Unhealthy behaviors lead to poor health outcomes, such as obesity and high blood pressure, which then limit mobility, creating a challenging cycle.

3. **Incentives to encourage more parents and caregivers in poverty to join the labor market.**

Many who do not work for home/family reasons and who live in poverty are unmarried without a full-time worker in the household. Increases to the earned income tax credit, child care assistance, or paid family leave could increase work rates among this group and may have positive long-term effects by building labor market experience that could lead to higher future earnings.16 The earning potential associated with labor market experience means that the initial expense of these programs may outweigh the longer-term costs of nonwork.

If government continues to minimally subsidize nonwork through income transfers, this analysis predicts that America will continue to make little progress on reducing rates of official poverty—that is, the percentage of Americans who are poor before factoring in many government benefits. Trends imply that nonworkers are likely to account for an increasing share of those living in poverty in coming years. If, instead of shoring up programs that channel funds to the nonworking poor, policymakers focus on increasing employment rates, then those in poverty will be able to benefit from the positive social and economic aspects of work, as well as to enjoy an increased likelihood of exiting poverty altogether. Workers also stand to benefit from the already existing system of work-based government benefits. Finding ways to get more poor Americans working by focusing policy on health issues and family responsibilities, as well as by reducing the work disincentives built into the current system, is the best path forward.

**About the Author**

Angela Rachidi is a research fellow in poverty studies at AEI, where she studies the effects of public policy and existing support programs on low-income families.
Notes


3. Ibid.


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## Table A1. Work Status of Working-Age People in Supplemental Poverty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No Work #</th>
<th>No Work %</th>
<th>Less Than Full-Time Work #</th>
<th>Less Than Full-Time Work %</th>
<th>Full-Time, Full-Year Work #</th>
<th>Full-Time, Full-Year Work %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>16,241,569</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
<td>8,516,058</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>4,536,046</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>16,415,453</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
<td>8,622,216</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>4,971,024</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>15,887,853</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>8,795,408</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
<td>5,250,485</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>15,655,162</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
<td>8,881,905</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>5,453,935</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>16,073,496</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>7,625,346</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>5,658,080</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


## Table A2. Work Status of All People in Supplemental Poverty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adult</th>
<th>Children by Adult Work Status</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly</td>
<td>6,633,770 13.8%</td>
<td>292,808 0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-Time, Full-Year Work</td>
<td>5,658,080 11.7%</td>
<td>4,322,285 9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Work</td>
<td>7,625,346 15.8%</td>
<td>3,683,200 7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Work</td>
<td>16,073,496 33.3%</td>
<td>3,922,834 8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35,990,692 74.7%</td>
<td>12,221,127 25.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


## Table A3. Working-Age People in Supplemental Poverty by Marital Status and Full-Time Worker in Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Previously Married</th>
<th>Never Married</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Full-Time Workers</td>
<td>1,191,089 54.9%</td>
<td>380,299 93.0%</td>
<td>1,152,493 88.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-Time Workers</td>
<td>977,183 45.1%</td>
<td>28,708 7.0%</td>
<td>151,910 11.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>