Manhood Impossible

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Unemployed Men and Stay-at-Home Dads

It’s a moderate Autumn day in Southeast Michigan, sunshine and comfortable temperatures concealing the long winter ahead. The sounds of Detroit-area radio fill my car as I travel east on I-96 toward a job fair. I scan the FM spectrum until it lands on a Motown station. Smokey Robinson is crying the “Tears of a Clown” for a lost love. I exit the highway onto Greenfield Road, having missed the expressway split that allows for local exits. This error takes me through the Fishkorn neighborhood of Detroit, a predominantly African American area struggling to survive years of tough times, like much of the city. No snow yet means it’s still construction season. The middle lane is being resurfaced, but the harsh weather and what looks like years of neglect leaves the street pockmarked with potholes and generally unforgiving to the dutiful Motor City procession of American-brand cars. Rundown buildings house small businesses and chain fast-food restaurants. Auto repair, hair care, men’s clothing, and tire and rim shops are nestled by gas stations, a dollar store, a county agency and low-cost apartments. Many of the businesses are closed, some permanently, and others only curiously so during business hours, as the weekday lunch hour approaches. Steel fencing and bars protect business windows from being smashed and imprison cars awaiting repair in auto shop lots. This section of the city looks like what I imagine most rustbelt areas of the
country do: battered by decades of deindustrialization and disproportionately suffering from the lingering effects of the Great Recession.

Another scan of the radio and the tuner finds a station playing gospel music. Kirk Franklin sings “I Smile,” dedicating his song to “recession, depression, and unemployment.” He tries to lift the spirits of those in Fishkorn and everywhere else, sharing their struggles, singing of better days ahead, telling them to remember that God is working for them, encouraging them not to give up despite how difficult their lives seem. He asks them to smile even though they hurt.

Abruptly, without turning, I enter the city of Dearborn. The roads, buildings, and landscaping suddenly and dramatically improve. Well-maintained businesses flank the smooth streets. A right turn onto Ford Road opens up a newer and shinier world. Big-box stores and national chain restaurants accompany a shopping center that can compete with most upscale malls; their website offers the tagline “You have the right to remain fabulous.” I envision Kirk Franklin smiling ironically.

I pull into the hotel parking lot where today’s job fair is being held. Staring back at me across the highway is Ford Motor Company’s sprawling headquarters, glistening in the sun, looming as a reminder of why Dearborn’s streets and businesses contrast so starkly with Fishkorn’s. But the imposing glass buildings emblazoned with the Ford emblem also tell another story. They are a reminder of the decline of the auto industry and U.S. manufacturing. For so many listening to Kirk Franklin (and, more so, their parents and grandparents), Ford’s headquarters speak to a mostly bygone era when blue-collar workers entered the middle class en masse—no college degree required. That road to the American dream, though, like the one running through Fishkorn, is in permanent disrepair.

**Job Fairs and Job Seeking**

The recession is officially over, but its effects are visible all around. The large lobby in the hotel where the job fair is held is populated by several dozen job-seekers, along with other hotel guests and staff. Most attendees are African American, in their 30s–50s. Oversized leather chairs surround a flat-screen television in one corner of the lobby; candidates who have heeded the job fair flyer’s request to “Dress for Success” are filling out applications and reviewing their résumés, ignoring news coverage of the latest panicky decision in Europe in response to the global recession. The indoor fountain drowns out the TV news anchor, who wasn’t going to capture anyone’s interest anyway. The afternoon session will begin in 30 minutes. I walk the lobby and overhear the usual chatter outside of a job fair: unsolicited advice shared by fellow job-seekers, a smattering of hopeful enthusiasm, and friendly confirmations of location
and start time. A couple of people are muttering to themselves or sharing their struggles with other job-seekers they just met. One woman exits the hotel with another, either a friend she came with or just made. “Girl,” she begins, drawing out the word in commiseration as they leave, presumably without the new jobs they were hoping to find at the morning session. This job fair, like every other in the aftermath of the recession, has too many job-seekers and too few jobs.

Near the TV, a half-dozen apparent strangers—three professionally dressed twentysomething African American women, two white men in their late ’50s or early ’60s who are dressed for what will likely be blue-collar opportunities, and a young African American man in a shirt and tie—share generic application forms to fill out before the afternoon session begins. Images of protestors on Wall Street fail to attract their attention. Three of them begin intently filling out applications. The atmosphere is supportive rather than competitive. Women outnumber men by a healthy majority, most outfitted in professional attire. Male attendees occasionally sport three-piece suits at one end of the spectrum or ball caps and jeans at the other, reflecting the range of advertised employers and job opportunities. Virtually everyone has a stack of résumés in hand and many have a look that suggests fatigue more than hope. Perhaps it’s just the long wait until the doors open or the way we tend to downsize our outward emotions in the company of strangers.

The lunch hour ends, and the job fair doors open. Sixty of us politely fall into line and deliberately enter the fair, which takes place in a windowless conference room off the lobby. A few dozen employers, most in business casual attire, stand behind or in front of their tables. They are cheerful, quick to greet anyone hovering nearby to initiate a conversation. Display boards are designed to attract attendees as they would judges at a science fair. Sales jobs dominate—cable, cell phones, security, insurance—no experience necessary! Like every other, this misleadingly titled fair mostly offers jobs rather than careers. But there are some positions that require professional training and presumably compensate accordingly. Corporate-speak and business buzzwords litter employers’ literature. Candidates are invited to take advantage of “the opportunity of a lifetime” to join a “success-oriented environment” in a “rapid growth” sector and become “part of our family.” I feel fortunate to be doing my job instead of having to look for one.

“How interested are you on a scale of 1 to 10?” asks a prospective employer to a job-seeker inquiring about a sales job. “Full-time or part-time?” a job candidate asks of another employer a few tables away. U.S. Border Patrol agents in full attire are recruiting job seekers in one corner of the room. Educational opportunities in the medical, hospitality, and culinary arts fields are pitched to those who might be interested in obtaining specialized training. Representatives from the Unemployment Insurance Agency have a table that receives steady traffic, despite a recent spate of news coverage about employers
notifying the unemployed they need not apply. Five minutes after the doors open, the conference room is packed and several dozen conversations fill the room. Résumé doctors providing free feedback attract a long line. Many more people filter in, making it difficult to walk around and look at display boards and flyers or make eye contact with employer representatives without bumping into someone. Too many job-seekers. Not enough jobs.

The dozen round tables in the lobby outside the conference room are intermittently occupied. People filter in and out of the job fair, sitting down in the lobby to fill out applications, make calls, regroup with friends, and gather their thoughts. After a couple hours, I have not seen anyone show any overt joy or excitement about a lead, although one woman tells someone on the other end of a cell phone call that she found an opening that is a perfect fit. Roger, an African American man in his 40s with a wisp of silver atop his full head of hair, is working on an application when I introduce myself. He is one of the long-term unemployed, out of the workforce more than a year because he has been taking care of an ill family member. Roger says he staves off depression by avoiding the news and its negativity, and he doesn’t get his hopes too high about a job opportunity. He focuses on his kids and his faith. But he can’t avoid explaining to me Detroit’s problems, including corruption, white flight to the suburbs, and city politics. A few minutes later, I sit down and speak with another man in his mid-40s, Melvin, who is reviewing an application he completed. He quietly and somewhat skeptically listens to my introduction and spiel before we begin discussing the recession and the job market. Melvin’s distrust quickly disappears, replaced by an openness and kindness that I imagine must be difficult for him to suppress, even for a few short seconds when approached by a stranger outside a job fair who looks like he’s selling something. Melvin is wearing a button-down shirt and dress pants, black-rimmed glasses, and his hair in cornrows. He is looking for a guaranteed-income job after working a couple of sales commission jobs. Salaried jobs with benefits are scarce, here and everywhere else.

The same conversations and scenes are repeated at the five job fairs I attend in five cities and three states. Outside the fairs, in lines and waiting areas, attendees slouch in chairs and lean against walls; they joke and sympathize with each other (one woman says to another job-seeker, “To look for a job is a job.”), enjoying informal conversations with others in their same situation. As they approach the entrance to the fair, they adjust themselves the way that one does before exiting a bathroom, fixing their hair and clothes before straightening their posture. When they exit the fair, many return to their earlier physical state, their posture and sometimes their hope deflated. Instead of jobs, nearly all leave the fair with free tote bags filled with the usual swag: cups, pens, and pads with company logos, and goodies such as tickets to a free movie screening or coupons for discounted meals.
Prospective employers also lurk outside of fairs, soliciting applicants while avoiding the steep fees to rent a job fair table. These parking lot pitches, often literally out of trunks of cars, are all commission sales jobs. Most are in financial services—life insurance, mortgages, investments. One such recruiter, a friendly, engaging man in his 30s with an accent that suggests he is from the Caribbean, says he is looking for people to train and help pass the certification exam so they can work part-time (no benefits). His company offers the 32 hours of classes for free and pays the exam fee. “People don’t realize most of the good jobs are gone,” he says. “You have to work for yourself now. But they still want the jobs with the benefits.” His pitch generates slightly more interest than the two middle-age men armed with bottles of creams and seeking sales associates to join the “antiaging” industry.

My own solicitations for interviews are mostly met with similar disinterest. People want paychecks, not face cream sales jobs or unpaid opportunities to bare their souls to a stranger. At a fair in South Florida, I walk quickly to an adjacent parking lot to catch two young guys before they get in their car. They are recently graduated international students, from France and Albania, respectively. They are struggling to find work both because of their international status and their lack of work experience. I apologetically explain that my focus is on American men. The young man from France says, “Even you!”—referring to them being excluded yet again due to their citizenship status. He says it jokingly, and we all share a laugh, but our conversation suggests the rejections are piling up and taking a toll. At a West Coast fair, I meet an IT worker who is returning to India the next day after living and working in the States for a decade. He says there are no more jobs here for him, citing outsourcing and free trade agreements.

There are many commonalities across the fairs I attend. The most striking pattern is the disconnect and power dynamic between the job-seekers on the one hand and the employers and job fair organizers on the other. Employers are overwhelmed with applications. Job-seekers are underwhelmed with the available positions. Recruiters are so excited to share amazing opportunities with motivated, enthusiastic self-starters. Job-seekers want salaries and benefits, not commission-based sales jobs. Recruiters are disproportionately young, attractive, and enthusiastic. Job-seekers are diverse, many appear haggard from extended bouts of unemployment or underemployment, and they are sometimes unable to conceal their disappointment with a fair’s offerings.

Job fair literature provides advice and long lists of “Do’s” and “Don’ts” for before, during, and after the event. All candidates are encouraged to shower or bathe, wear little or no perfume or cologne, bring copies of résumés, make eye contact, remember and use names, and be genuine and positive. Women are told to wear simple makeup and dress conservatively—no hemlines above the knee or sheer fabrics. Men’s guidelines have no don’ts; wear a suit or a
jacket and tie is all. Advice extends to how to keep a job after landing one: show up on time, do not gossip, be honest, don’t clock-watch, get along with others, don’t steal. *Don’t steal!*

At one fair there are a handful of motivational signs scattered about on easels. They are of the widely parodied and mocked variety that litter company hallways, often further disaffecting office workers. One sign is titled “Destiny” with a two-headed arrow pointing in opposite directions beneath it, followed by the words, “a matter of choice or a matter of chance.” A second reads, “Goals” and “to get started, you must have a destination.” A third sign includes the formula “E = MC²,” where “Excellence” equals “Motivation × Confidence.” As we are ushered down a long hotel lobby, a job fair staff member tells us, “Throw away your gum. Put your cell phones on vibrate. Smile. The littlest thing can make a big difference.” The condescending advice and platitudes feel like finger-pointing. The message seems to be, “Fix what’s wrong with you or you won’t get a job.”

But no amount of individual effort, enthusiasm, or preparation—hygienic or otherwise—can turn few options to many, or lousy options to viable ones. The ratio of job seekers to available jobs is more than four to one when I attend these fairs in late 2011 and early 2012. Employment seems more a matter of chance than choice. The unemployed are well represented by highly motivated people with clear goals in mind, but multiple years of historically high unemployment has taken its toll on many people’s confidence. Individual effort is no match for structural unemployment.

**The Breadwinner Ideal**

The second half of this book examines men’s breadwinner expectations, the manhood ideal for adult men when they eclipse adolescence and youth. Bodies become a secondary source of masculine status and identity at this stage of life. Adult men’s ability to maintain control over their own and their family’s financial situation is their foremost expectation. Just as American body ideals are unattainable for boys and men, so is the breadwinner ideal. The breadwinner ideal is unattainable because of how it and the contemporary U.S. economy are structured. And despite men’s breadwinner status being more myth than historical fact, despite it being more elusive today than in previous decades—and less desirable for many families, especially those with women who gladly join a decades-long influx into the labor market—the man-as-breadwinner ideal persists. This means that men who are unable to fulfill it, due to unemployment or low-paying jobs, and men who choose not to fulfill it, like voluntary stay-at-home dads, often bear the consequences of failure. Like men who don’t meet body ideals, they often bring those consequences to bear upon others.
The breadwinner ideal arose due to an array of structural and cultural forces. The United States’ shift from an agricultural to an industrialized society, peaking in the late 1800s and early 1900s, transformed work and family life. It resulted in massive immigration to the United States and internal migration to urban areas for factory work. Political, religious, scientific, educational, and economic leaders with the most power and influence were native-born white men. They excluded and marginalized women in all of these arenas. By actively attempting to exclude women from the public sphere and confining them to the private sphere, they masculinized work, feminized the home, and created the breadwinner and homemaker ideals. By actively excluding and marginalizing immigrant men, African American men, and other citizen men of color, they denied these men access to the breadwinner ideal and ensured that immigrant women, poorer women, and women of color were more likely to have to work in the paid labor force.¹

A post–World War II economic boom, highlighted by the GI Bill and the growth of the suburbs and auto industry, allowed many men, including blue-collar workers without college degrees, to earn a “family wage” that supported an unemployed wife and kids. The 1950s father-as-breadwinner, mother-as-homemaker model was mythologized by popular television programs such as Leave It to Beaver and Father Knows Best. But this arrangement was never the majority. American families have always been more diverse than the two-parent, nuclear version, and women have always worked for pay (at jobs and inside the home via small businesses) at rates that further debunk the separate spheres myth.² Beginning in the 1970s, the U.S. economy shifted again, eventually resulting in widespread deindustrialization due to globalization, international trade agreements, and advances in technology. This coincided with second-wave feminism and its challenges to gender inequality. Together they enabled and demanded a spike in women’s labor force participation.

Slightly more than 1 in 3 women ages 18–64 were in the labor force in 1950. By 2011, it was up to roughly 3 out of 4, with women comprising about 47% of the workforce. More than 7 in 10 moms with kids under 18 are working due to a mix of financial and ideological reasons.³ In terms of the men-as-breadwinner ideal, what this now means is that only 1 out of 5 American households with children under 18 have working husbands and full-time, stay-at-home wives.⁴ Of married moms, 15% earn more than their husbands, up from just 4% in 1960.⁵ The transition from a General Motors to a Walmart economy for the majority of Americans without college degrees means few men earn enough to sustain a middle-class existence as sole breadwinners. Still, men’s breadwinner ideal persists.

My research began as men confronted another undermining structural force: the Great Recession. The recession lasted fewer than two years, from
the end of 2007 to the middle of 2009. But it was deep and wide (spreading across the globe), and the recovery slow and incomplete. It did not approach the devastation of the 1930s’ Great Depression, but it was much worse than all other recessions. There were precipitous declines in GDP, the stock market, home prices, and families’ and organizations’ net worth, and steep rises in foreclosures, bankruptcy, and personal and national debt. The U.S. unemployment rate peaked at 10% in 2009, took two more years to fall below 9%, and very slowly declined to 5.5% by the middle of 2015. Many discouraged workers eventually stopped looking, the older ones waiting out the clock to collect social security benefits and, if they are lucky, retirement funds. When workers stop looking, they are no longer counted as unemployed; therefore, the actual unemployment rate has been much higher than the official one. The “long-term unemployed” are those who have been out of work and looking for a job for at least 27 weeks, or about six months. During and after the recession, single people, people of color, those with disabilities, those in poverty, and construction workers were most likely to be unemployed long term. The initial heavy loss of (and later recovery of many) blue-collar jobs generated a lot of coverage of men’s unemployment, but this narrative is incomplete. Throughout the slow recovery, women’s rates of unemployment were lower, but African American and Hispanic women’s rates were still higher than the overall average. African American men’s rates were much higher, peaking at more than 16% and remaining about double the overall rate several years into the recovery. The recession led to an increase in less desirable part-time jobs, not to mention poverty.

American culture, and even more so, American men, still cling to the breadwinner ideal, which is now more difficult than ever to achieve. Critics of capitalism point out its key contributions to the breadwinner dilemma. Boom and bust periods, regular changing workforce demands, and the rising concentration of wealth among those at the very top exclude many workers from breadwinner status. The economy is structured in such a way as to systematically disempower large swaths of workers, but the American Ethos says failure is the result of an individual lack of effort, intelligence, and ability to compete. With no upper limit on men’s earnings, even those who enjoy middle-class incomes or better may ceaselessly feel as if they are not making enough. They look around and see so many others earning so much more. Critics argue that capitalism provides the economic and political circumstances that inevitably lead most men to perceive themselves as failures. Market capitalism strips most workers of their sense of autonomy, control, satisfaction, and ultimately for men, breadwinner status and identity. In turn, this causes men to feel anxiety, shame, and frustration, which makes them more susceptible to being controlled and therefore to conform to hegemonic masculine ideals.
Perhaps what’s most surprising about the breadwinner ideal is how it has endured despite the near equal presence and widespread acceptance of women in the workforce. Less than one-third of Americans think men should earn more than woman partners, though those whose education level maxes out at high school are twice as likely to think so.\textsuperscript{11} Being the \textit{sole} breadwinner is no longer the standard, but being \textit{a} breadwinner remains the masculine ideal. Families’ need for two incomes explains in part why few men have quit their jobs to become stay-at-home dads, but more so it is the feminization, stigmatization, and devaluation of childcare that prevents most men from considering doing this kind of work. Our society values and rewards paid work and does little to support parents or childrearing. Choosing to be a stay-at-home dad is to defy social norms and relinquish economic power. Estimates of this population vary widely, numbering anywhere from fewer than 200,000 to around two million, depending on who gets counted.\textsuperscript{12}

Feminist progress toward eliminating gender inequality at work and home is unfinished and stalled.\textsuperscript{13} Many more men (younger men in particular) ideologically embrace shared parenting and dual careers.\textsuperscript{14} However, there is a gap between their attitudes and practices. “Forces of change” such as men's declining breadwinner status, women's economic gains, and new fathering and relationship ideals are up against “forces of resistance” such as the persistence of the “ideal worker” ethic, increasing time demands of workplaces, and market measurement of “marriageable” (breadwinning) men. These institutional contradictions produce stressed-out dual-earner couples and cause many men to remain single longer or adopt a neotraditional model that still prioritizes their paid work. The persistence of the gendered wage gap is due to occupational segregation, women’s continued childrearing responsibilities, the lack of state programs (childcare, paid family leave, etc.) to offset this unequal responsibility, and the devaluation of women’s paid and unpaid work, which deters men from pursuing these options. If only half the population alters their work-family commitments, and no policy changes facilitate it, the gender revolution will remain incomplete.

Significant changes have occurred, but not revolutionary ones. A recent Pew Research Center Study captured the changes in parental behaviors and attitudes. Among all parents with kids living at home in 1965, mothers did 8 hours of paid work, 32 hours of housework, and 10 hours of childcare per week.\textsuperscript{15} Fathers did 42 hours of paid work, 4 hours of housework, and 2.5 hours of childcare per week. In 2015, moms’ paid work increased to 25 hours, their housework declined to 18, and their childcare increased to 15. For dads, after a dip in paid work hours during the recession, they returned to 43 hours per week, and their time spent on housework and childcare increased to 9 and 7 hours, respectively.\textsuperscript{16} Looking just at dual-earner couples, the
numbers converge some and are much more equal than typical arrangements from decades ago, but a big gap remains. Parents are spending more time with kids, and fathers have nearly tripled the meager hours they spent 50 years ago.

Still, moms are spending about twice as much time as dads are with kids. Dual-income households divide labor more equally than ones where only one parent works, with total hours nearly identical. Breadwinning fathers’ workloads are about 11 hours more than their non-working partners’. When moms serve as sole breadwinners, they put in 25 more hours of work per week. The disparity in housework and childcare between stay-at-home moms and stay-at-home dads is even more unequal. The former do 46 hours per week, three times as much as their breadwinning partners, while the latter do merely 6 more hours per week than women breadwinners. In terms of attitudes, both mothers and fathers are most likely to say young children are best served by a mother who works part-time (instead of full-time or not at all). Dueling work and family responsibilities are very or somewhat difficult to balance according to a majority of both working mothers and fathers.

Given the institutional contradictions that have only partially transformed gendered work-family arrangements and the unique impact of the Great Recession, I set out to study non-breadwinning men, both those who are able to choose to leave the paid labor force and those forced out. I focus on how these men and their families are affected by men’s loss of breadwinner status and identity. Specifically, I seek to identify what conditions lead unemployed men and stay-at-home dads to either internalize and compensate for their loss of breadwinner status or reject this hegemonic ideal and redefine what it means to be a man.

The Non-breadwinners

I attended five job fairs, conducted 25 in-depth interviews with unemployed men and stay-at-home fathers, and gathered and analyzed data from dozens of online forums and diaries dedicated to unemployment and stay-at-home dads. The five job fairs I attended were held in Michigan (Dearborn and Detroit), Florida (Fort Lauderdale), and California (East Bay San Francisco and Sacramento).17 My interview participants are diverse in numerous ways: how and why they became non-breadwinners, their length of unemployment, what kind of work they used to do and hope to do again, their marital status and number of dependents, where they live, and their age, social class, education, sexuality and, somewhat less so, race and ethnicity. Several are veterans. Two of the men were recently released from incarceration. My sample is similar to the population of stay-at-home dads in that they are older than other fathers and more likely to be white. My participants are more likely to have a college degree, which is less common among the population of stay-at-home dads. In
two-parent, different-sex families, stay-at-home dads are rare. Only about 6% of fathers in these situations stay at home, compared to about 30% of similarly situated mothers.18

I made contact with prospective interview participants individually at job fairs, online (via unemployment and stay-at-home dad diaries, forums, and groups), and in a couple of cases, via personal contacts. Twelve of the non-breadwinning men are partnered stay-at-home dads by choice: Jamie, Don, Henry, Justin, Matthew, Mika, Nick, Peter, Ryan, Rob, Tim, and Zach. Their partners earn enough to allow these men to do unpaid work. Reflecting broader patterns of privilege and inequality, these men and their partners are mostly white, older, and highly formally educated. The other thirteen men unwillingly became non-breadwinners, losing their jobs right before, during, or in the wake of the recession. Anthony, Liam, and Marcus became stay-at-home dads to young children after losing their jobs, with their respective families relying on their wives’ incomes. Four other unemployed men—Frank, Jonathan, T. J., Tyler—are either married with older kids who do not require much or any day-to-day care or are divorced, not living with their children, and only partially responsible for financial support. Phil is married with no children. Caleb, DeShawn, Dwayne, Jerry, and Jordan are all single with no children. These 25 non-breadwinners are situated differently based on their individual experiences, employment and family situations, and demographic characteristics. What influences their responses to being non-breadwinners and how they respond to their situations vary accordingly.

**Expectations, Finances, Control, and Support**

As with men who are unable or unwilling to fulfill body ideals, men who do not fulfill the breadwinner ideal respond in different ways. They internalize their socially unacceptable status, try to restore it via repair or compensation, or, in an increasing number of cases, reject the breadwinner standard and redefine what it means to be a man. The men I interview became non-breadwinners for a variety of personal, situational, and structural reasons. The four most important influences that affect how they respond to being non-breadwinners are their own and their partners’ breadwinner expectations for them; their financial situation; their sense of control over their situation; and the support of their family and friends.

**Breadwinner Expectations**

Most of the unemployed men I interview are falling short of their own or their partner’s work expectations. Conversely, most stay-at-home dads and their breadwinning partners like their arrangement. A man responds worst to being a non-breadwinner when both he and his partner are disappointed that
he is not the major income earner. Next worst is when either is disappointed in his job status. When neither partner is bothered by his unemployment or both prefer that he is the primary caretaker, negative feelings and reactions are significantly lessened. Rarely, though, are they entirely eliminated. Deviating from men’s breadwinner ideal is challenging even for those couples who consciously reject it.

Frank is a white, 44-year-old former breadwinner who was laid off from his technology sector job two years before we speak, when U.S. unemployment peaked. His wife does not earn enough to support their middle-class life, in part because he had always earned more and they both expected him to do so. Frank does not blame himself for losing his job (his company downsized) or being unable to find one during the recession. Still, he says, “I consider this a temporary setback, so I would not want to change my definition of man as breadwinner.” Two-plus years into his unemployment, he and his wife still view it as temporary. They were one of only a few different-sex couples I studied where both partners thought the husband should be the primary breadwinner.

Dwayne is a single African American man in his early 30s who has been inconsistently employed for many years. Despite what he identifies as a series of devastating economic recessions in his hometown of New York City, he says he feels responsible: “It’s a man’s job to find work and take care of myself.” He stays up nights wondering why he can’t find and keep a job. He feels additionally burdened to challenge negative racial portrayals and stereotypes. He says his childhood was filled with media images of black men as wealthy drug dealers, with expensive cars, gold chains, and beepers, which (other than the violence) attracted his peers. He committed himself to avoiding that trap and trying to share positive stories that he feels have been largely ignored—“the hardworking men and women who no one in America pays attention to. I feel these brothers and sisters are the real heroes of the community.”

DeShawn, now in his 40s, experienced the consequences of violence firsthand when he was young. His father was murdered when DeShawn was in elementary school: “He always told me, ‘If I’m not around, you’re the man of the house.’ And then [after my father was killed] my mother told me that—‘You’re the man of the house.’ So that made me step up. But that’s bad information, that you’re the man of the house, because it puts responsibility on [a child’s] shoulder; that puts a psychological responsibility in his mind, that he wants to live up to that and perform according to that standard. Because I was doing stuff [as a kid] I had no business doing.” He resorted to crime to earn money and ended up incarcerated for most of his 20s and 30s. He still embraces the men-as-breadwinner model, in part because he remains single, but now has a career doing antiviolence work.

Disappointed spouses and partners heavily influence how men experience not being breadwinners. Jonathan, a white 50-year-old who has bounced
around during many years of underemployment, and now unemployment, feels that burden. His wife always out-earned him but never desired to be the breadwinner. She always wanted him to earn enough so she could work part-time. “Each day, week, and month that goes by only adds to the disappointment,” he says.

Zach, a white father of three in his mid-30s, chose to quit his career in social services to raise kids. His wife, Stacey, has always earned about double his income, so he was the obvious choice when they agreed that one of them should stay home. However, she would prefer to be the one to do so. She does what’s best for the family, but he says, “She would quit her job tomorrow” if he could earn her salary. Stacey having to go to work while Zach spends time with the kids creates “a little resentment.” His employment history and lifelong interest in fathering somewhat cushions her disappointment. He found his paid job rewarding, but other than the “gut check” of giving up a paycheck, his transition was easy. He always dreamed of a family above all. Zach feels he is “different than most men,” that he was made to be a stay-at-home dad.

Most partners did not place sole or primary breadwinner expectations on the men I interview, and thus these partners did not feel let down when they became the sole provider. A few men still experience their unemployment as a failure despite their partner’s support. Liam was forced into being a stay-at-home dad when he lost his financial services company. His wife’s six-figure income provided for their family, and she was looking forward to Liam relieving her of the second shift of housework and childcare she had been largely shouldering when they both worked full-time. He says he was never hung up on the fact that she was earning more, but “I still felt that I wasn’t quite living up to my role as a man, as the husband, as the father, to bring home something. I didn’t really care if it was less than what my wife was making, but I wanted to contribute.”

Mika, a 49-year-old father of Samoan descent, retired from the military in part to allow his new wife a chance to get her career started while he raised their baby. He thought the transition would be easy. It was not. He went from “having a position of responsibility and respect and, you know, ego building—you can add that in—” to staying home and putting all his focus and energies into caring for a baby: “I really didn’t realize what I was getting into. I thought, ‘Oh, this would be cool.’” Soon after, though, he had second thoughts: “I was still wanting to work and do something and feel needed,” which he did not initially get from childrearing. Mika took great pride in his military work, and he was not quite ready to give up his career. After a year of being a stay-at-home parent, he returned to Iraq, working as a private contractor in a combat zone (which he described as “easier” than being a stay-at-home dad, given his extensive military training and experience, along with the shock of initially adjusting to being a primary caretaker). His wife supported his decision to retire and
stay at home, as well as his decision to return to Iraq, and lastly, his return to being the at-home parent again.

About one-third of the men I interview are stay-at-home dads either because the couples wanted him in that role or they wanted one or the other to stay home. Importantly, they had the resources enough that losing his income didn’t create financial distress. Peter is 48 and a stay-at-home dad for three former foster children whom he and his wife adopted. His wife, Regina, is an incredibly supportive partner who was recruited to run a hospital in the rural South. Peter lost his professional network when they left the West Coast, but he quickly found work after their move. Eventually, though, he found that his part-time career interfered with childcare, which led him to quit and stay home full-time. Regina laughed when he told her he quit his job. He, too, laughs as he shares the conversation with me:

She goes, “I told you, you didn’t have to [work].” And then she was like, “You know, I understand that you want to have a job and say you’re contributing, but you being at home is what we need you to do to contribute to the family, not bringing in income.” It was nice to hear your wife say “Hey, don’t worry.” But in the back of your head, you’re thinking . . . and I’ve told her this, I said, “I know I hear you saying it. I see you. I see the words coming out of your mouth. I don’t necessarily believe that you feel that way.” And I’ve told her, I say, “I’m worried that you’re going to come home one day and be like ‘You lazy schmuck. Why aren’t you working?’”

Peter and his wife have a strong marriage, and he is a proud and deeply fulfilled stay-at-home father. But he still can’t quite silence the voice inside his head that questions whether he should be doing what he and his wife have explicitly agreed is best for them. Peter blames the generation and culture he grew up in for equating manhood with paid work. He actively resists this expectation while contending with its residue.

Many stay-at-home dads overcome these pressures. With their partners’ support, they find ways to escape or accept leaving the paid labor force. Ryan, an early 30s white father of two, was laid off soon before he planned to quit working to take care of his kids. He beams: “I love [being a stay-at-home dad]. It’s the job that I always wanted.” He and his partner have made financial sacrifices, but they prefer that over using day care. They both wanted one parent at home, and both have been the working parent and the at-home parent.

Tim, white and a self-described feminist in his 30s, is married to a woman who usually earned more than him while he was working. He says, “I was never opposed to being a stay-at-home dad. I do whatever I have to do to help contribute. I didn’t have that kind of ‘I’m not a real man if I don’t have a job’ attitude. I honestly felt and feel that whoever stays home and whoever
works, they’re both a crucial part of the family, equally important, and both necessary.” When he lost his job before his first child was born, “it was pretty much a no-brainer” that he would stay home, given his wife’s high-income job. Other couples repeatedly made what they saw as the same pragmatic decision that so many couples do: the higher earner remains in the labor force and the lower earner, especially if much of that person’s income will go to childcare, stays home. Setting aside gendered expectations and preferences for different-sex couples, the wage gap between women and men makes it more likely that she will stay home. Structural gender inequality plays out in the lives of individual families.

Phil and his wife, Cindy, are considering having kids, but for now, he is simply one more among the millions of long-term unemployed. They fled the harsh winters of northern Wisconsin for warmer weather, giving up two six-figure positions. Cindy quickly found a great job after their move, but Phil’s unluckily timed break got engulfed by the recession. Cindy is open to any family arrangement and appreciates that Phil does all the work around the house. Phil is open to being a stay-at-home parent and is enjoying gardening and volunteering while trying to network and land a new job. He always expected that Cindy would earn more and embraced it. “I don’t subscribe to the ‘I’m the provider. I’m the big macho Neanderthal man. You, woman,’” he says. Phil thinks Cindy is smarter and always knew she would earn triple his income. He says he “couldn’t give a shit” about men’s stereotypical physical or financial expectations. Cindy’s progressive ideology reduces pressure on Phil during his long-term unemployment. He’s been out of work three years, much longer than the shocking peak national average of 40 weeks in 2011.19

Financial Situation

The unwillingly unemployed men I interview had to do what many singles and families do when an income is lost: accrue credit card and other debt, borrow money from friends and family, withdraw money from retirement funds, not pay all their bills on time, declare bankruptcy, skip doctor’s visits and other basic health care, and more.

With only their own income to rely on, the single men I interview are generally the most financially insecure. None of them is a single parent and only one has a child for whom he is partially financially responsible. This contrasts sharply with many single women’s experiences. One key reason women are overrepresented among those in poverty (i.e., the “feminization of poverty”) is their much greater likelihood of being single parents.20 Single mothers experience poverty because of little or no economic support from the children’s fathers, a social safety net that alleviates far less poverty than comparable nations, occupational gender segregation, a gendered wage gap, and a general devaluation of women’s work.21 The 2012 poverty rate for families led
by single mothers in the United States was 31%, nearly double that of single-father families. In developing nations, girls’ and women’s denial of access to education, credit, inheritance, and more generally, social and political power further explains their comparatively worse circumstances. I did not have the opportunity to speak with families where no adults are employed, who deal with homeless or food insecurity or face dire poverty.

Jerry, T. J., and Dwayne are three single unemployed men severely constrained by their lack of income. Jerry was working part-time and caring for his dying mother before he moved to Nevada to find full-time work. He utilized the services of a homeless shelter for veterans before moving into a transitional housing facility. He says he should have earned a military pension but was kicked out for being gay well before the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. Despite being in his late 50s and having an inconsistent recent work history, he is optimistic that he will find enough work to meet his minimal needs. Meanwhile, he is buffered by local veterans’ programs. T. J. is a divorced father of a high school graduate, white and in his late 40s, and has been unemployed for two years after a long period bouncing between the military, civilian jobs, and joblessness. He served for more than a decade but finds that civilian employers do not think those experiences translate. This is especially true for young returning veterans, ages 20–24, whom employers may stereotype as having PTSD symptoms and nontransferable skills such as being a sniper; their unemployment rate peaked at nearly one out of three, or double their same-aged nonmilitary peers. T. J. says he would be homeless if not for help from his siblings over the years. He describes his situation as “still critical” even on his pension. He has to budget enough gas money to visit his adult son and attend community college classes. His child support responsibilities will end soon, but he will need that money to attend classes full-time. “I’d feel terrible if my son was living with me,” he says. “I wouldn’t be able to provide him with the things he needs. That really troubles me. I’m supposed to be able to support my family. I’m grateful my ex-wife and her husband are working.”

Dwayne’s years of unemployment and low-income jobs makes his situation tenuous. Family help out when they can, and because of them, he’s unlikely to face homelessness, but money is extremely tight. He has tracked his spending to the penny at times: “On some occasions I had to make painful decisions like choosing between snacks and soap . . . I don’t want to go back to being that way again. It’s like living in a box. Everywhere I went, I ran into a wall.” Even the job search process is a financial gamble, as he invests the little money he has in the resources needed to find work. It’s a catch-22: “To look for a job, you need to have money. The bills are still coming in. Paper and toner for résumés, dry cleaning, and bus fare don’t come cheap. Neither does information. And when you don’t have money, you can’t get to those job leads or the interview.
Unemployment is a race against the clock, trying to do as much as you can before your money runs out.”

Some of the married unemployed men face serious short- and long-term financial challenges, if not the dollar-to-dollar constraints of T. J. and Dwayne. Frank’s family had to declare bankruptcy to keep their home and they have depleted much of their retirement savings. Occasional financial support from parents ensures they do not suffer more serious consequences.

Marcus is an involuntarily unemployed stay-at-home father of one with a second child on the way. He is African American, in his early 30s, and despite his family’s fiscal uncertainty, ebullient about the forthcoming birth of his second child. He lost several customer service jobs during recession cutbacks, but his wife earns enough to keep the family afloat. He picks up odd jobs here and there, while his mom watches his child, to cover grocery costs. Marcus remains resilient and mostly positive while still anxious about his situation: “I’m happy to be a father right now, but it’s difficult knowing that you have another child on the way and trying to figure out, man, how am I going to provide for them? I’m going to need more room. I’m going to need—there’s the pampers, the milk, you know—everything necessary to raise a child. I worry and I wonder, what am I going to do?” He is hopeful about finding work but scared it won’t happen before the birth. Meanwhile, Marcus says he is “trying my damnedest not to spend money.”

About half of the non-breadwinning men I interview are financially stable, usually thanks to their partner’s income. Phil says he has “a lot of stress” from four years of lost salary, but Cindy’s substantial income leaves them secure. Most of the men who are stay-at-home dads by choice made that decision with their partner because of their financial stability. Matthew, a mid-30s white father of one child, says he quit his career to stay home because his partner, David, earns more than twice as much as Matthew did—enough to sustain a comfortable existence in an expensive big city. Financial stability goes a long way toward alleviating non-breadwinning men’s concerns about not fulfilling that ideal.

Sense of Control

Men’s sense of control also influences their non-breadwinning experience. It is affected by whether they arrive there voluntarily, how it impacts their relationships, if they attribute job loss to personal or external reasons, and their emotions and sense of self and identity. Less control causes more problems.

Most unemployed men want to find jobs. Conversely, most of the stay-at-home dads do not. Anthony is one of the exceptions. He is an early 50s, unwillingly unemployed, white stay-at-home father of one tween daughter. He has been employed on and off for much of his adult life but has not held a
full-time job for three years. “Even before the recession, I had a difficult time getting work,” he says, blaming himself for his unemployment. “I don’t think it’s too much the recession. I think it’s me.” Anthony appreciates how staying at home positively affects his relationship with his daughter, and he enjoys cooking her meals and picking her up from school. However, he does not enjoy housework or other mundane childcare tasks. “You know, I love being a dad, but I would have no issue being the sole provider,” he says. “It would do my ego a lot to make a decent living and to be coming and going.” Anthony worries his unemployment is placing his marriage at risk, which reinforces his feeling of powerlessness. He says, “[My wife] does have an alpha personality. She really does, and I don’t think I do. But I’m trying to change that only because it’s going to give me a feeling of more control, you know. A feeling of more control, to be more involved with the family finances. And since I did get a rather nice inheritance . . . that’s giving me a feeling that I’m, you know, in control of my finances. She has her finances with a job, and she has a lot of money put away. So I’m trying to get some control back.”

Tyler, a 26-year-old white divorced father of two, is living in a halfway house after being released from prison. He has literally lost control over most aspects of his life since his incarceration. Several years ago, Tyler was living his dream. He was a rising star as a sales associate at a midsize tech company. He got married, had kids, and despite his lack of a college degree, he earned enough to buy a home in the suburbs. His wife was able to stay at home to raise their kids, which is what they both desired: “I felt great, because I felt I was unstoppable. Because my dad always instilled in me that you need to make six figures to be able to live a life, to be able to live not paycheck to paycheck. So because that was embedded in my mind at a young age, I had it in me that I had to make six figures.” He worked hard and arrived at his goal. Tyler’s life changed in an instant when he was hit by a car while crossing the street on his lunch break. His surgeries and degenerating condition led to a pain pill addiction, and because of his dependence, he illegally obtained prescriptions from multiple doctors. The judge gave him a harsh sentence. Tyler’s life began to unravel as he headed to a county jail and then a state prison. Once there, he kicked his addiction and was a model inmate before completing rehab and moving into the halfway house.

Tyler now has little control over his financial situation or much else in his life. He faces numerous obstacles: a criminal record, a state-mandated requirement that employers report on his work status, mandatory counseling meetings, time-restricted leaves from the halfway house, confinement to public transportation, and limited cell phone minutes to manage his job search and personal life. “People lose their jobs like crazy because of the way this [halfway house is] ran,” he says. The recession compounds his obstacles to employment. He has a large gap in his résumé, making him part of the less desirable
long-term unemployed. And his earlier successful career makes him over-
qualified for most of the positions available to people with a criminal record. 
Employers assume he will quickly leave for better opportunities. He is in a sec-
ond catch-22: If he earns too much he loses his welfare and has to pay insurance
to cover his treatment. He hopes to land a job, save money, and move into his
own place, but feels hogtied: “[The] way this facility is ran . . . [all the restric-
tions] make you only reach for Toys R Us jobs, because you really couldn’t have
a full-time regular job here [because of outpatient drug and alcohol counseling
requirements]. So it ain’t like you can carry a nine-to-five job Monday through
Friday.” Tyler lost his career, marriage, independence, and freedom. In transi-
tion, he’s struggling to restore all four and return to fulfilling his own and his
family’s breadwinner expectations.

The long-term unemployed who have been out of the labor market for more
than a year are the slowest to reenter it. They represented nearly one-third of
all unemployed workers during peak unemployment, and older (55-plus) long-
term unemployed workers had the highest rates. Frank’s long-term unem-
ployment and mounting financial troubles have affected him and his marriage.
At his nadir, he says, “The rejections were really, really piling up, I mean the
loss of control was like, ‘I can’t land a full-time job; bills are going to be dif-
cult to pay.’ So frustration kicked in, not depression right away but almost a
sense of losing control and trying to protect my wife from the ugliness as far as
you know the ‘Did you look today?’ ‘Yes I did.’ ‘Did you get anything?’ ‘No,
no, no I didn’t.’ And so that started to become a daily routine.” Bankruptcy
and the tight job market forced him to make compromises. He abandoned
hope of restoring his career and simply sought whatever job he could find to
alleviate his family’s financial crunch. It was just “job searching,” not a search
for work he would find fulfilling or enjoyable. Any full-time gig would do.
Frank does not feel personally responsible for his initial unemployment; he
mostly views the recession as the source of his ongoing troubles. Still, his fam-
ily’s material reality and his scramble to find a paycheck have left him feeling as
if he has little agency.

Marcus stays grounded during his bout with unemployment because of his
wife’s job and support and his love for his child. He says those things, along
with prayer, help him stay positive in the face of the recession. He follows his
mother’s advice: “You can’t control the world, but if you control the things
that you’re able to control, everything can work out for itself.” He enthusiasti-
cally attends every job fair he can, constantly checks and applies for jobs, keeps
his résumé up to date, and prepares himself for when an opportunity presents
itself. He also has taken the extra time he has to lose weight and improve his
health, which reduces his stress. “And that helps,” he says, “But at the same
time, I mean, when it boils down to it, you still want to be a breadwinner for
your family, you still want to be the person your wife looks to and can count
on, you know, saying, ‘Hey, no matter what, I know my husband has my back,’ and you know, telling her to calm down, and you know, ‘We’ll be OK.’” But he doesn’t really know if that’s true. Marcus is used to being self-reliant, a rock for himself and his family. Structural unemployment has him questioning himself as well as the concept of the American dream:

All this is happening in the middle of the recession. And that’s what makes it hard, you know, makes it difficult. I think everybody should have an opportunity. I mean, the American dream, it’s not there anymore. I was raised [with this idea] from my parents [that] if you work hard and you save your money, you’ll be able to get a home. You’ll be able to take care of your kids, and you know, it’s not that anymore. It’s not that. That’s not even . . . It’s not anywhere close to that anymore.

Marcus gets frustrated when people assume he isn’t working because he doesn’t want to. “Take any job! Do anything!” doesn’t account for being overqualified, as he has experienced.

Jerry also contemplates his situation in the context of the American economy and work-related values. He says there is “some mobility still” despite the country’s problems. Staying optimistic eases his psychological burden. He admits, “It’s easier said than done,” but believes his difficult situation is temporary. “I’m doing what’s necessary because of my own values of hard work, self-respect, and never giving up,” he says. He’s still angry about getting kicked out of the military for being gay and losing his pension; being discriminated against by his own country is “a factor that can’t be ignored” in his having to utilize a homeless shelter. He was depending on that income: “It was just taken away, so it’s like, all of a sudden, you’re put in a different class; you’re marginalized to a different class.” His recent transition into his own subsidized apartment has him feeling not only upbeat but more autonomous “because I can control my environment a little more . . . If you can’t control your environment, like in the shelter, there’s always a sense of anxiety in the background.”

Voluntary stay-at-home dads enjoy a much greater sense of control over their lives. Jamie, white and in his mid-30s, took some time to settle into his new role after stepping away from his career and adopting a child with his partner: “To go from being a working professional and just kind of feeling very comfortable in your job, and you know, kind of pushing things through, and you know, you get a phone call and you just deal with it, to . . . a defiant little child who doesn’t want to do what you say—I mean, it’s stressful.” He still finds ways to challenge himself beyond being a parent and has found parenting much more manageable as his son ages. Stay-at-home dad Zach says that with three kids, “you’re constantly being tested. There’s always something going on. Somebody’s fighting, something’s happening, something’s been spilling or
getting damaged.” His ability to calmly deal with the unexpected while still managing the household is what provides him with a sense of control. Zach says he “pretty much [does] everything.” His wife “works and supports us and spends time with the kids. That’s that. Everything else is me”: bills, budgeting, cooking, cleaning, all work inside and outside of the house. Matthew says his husband’s breadwinner status does not cause any gendered angst or sense of loss of control. His straight friends, though, have had a harder time giving up their careers: “I think it’s a little different in my situation, because (a) it’s a choice, [and] (b) it’s a little different where I have some male friends that are stay-at-home dads who feel kind of weird about it ’cause their wives are the breadwinner and making more money.”

Manhood is largely contingent on men’s ability to control themselves, others, and their environment. For adult men, controlling their ability to provide for themselves and their families is the foremost measure of manhood. Losing that sense of control threatens their sense of self and identity, inviting an array of personal and social problems. Yet many stay-at-home dads interpret their nonfinancial contributions to their family as equivalent to their partner’s breadwinning. They find a sense of control in being primary caretakers and home managers, and in other aspects of their lives.

Social Support

The social support unemployed men and stay-at-home dads receive also affects how they respond to being non-breadwinners. Partners first and foremost, and family, friends, and online and in-person support groups all matter. Unemployment and stay-at-home parenting can be particularly isolating. Men may be more susceptible to this isolation and all its consequences given their smaller friendship networks, the greater impact unemployment tends to have on their sense of self and identity, and for stay-at-home dads, the fewer peers they have and minimal socializing they do with stay-at-home moms. Being able to connect with others online and in person via online meet-up groups has expanded opportunities for unemployed people and stay-at-home parents to find extrafamilial support.

Several men worry about their marriages because of their long-term unemployment. Jonathan’s extended non-breadwinning has endangered his relationship. He believes his wife, Suzy, is resentful of their financial situation, which undermines her support for Jonathan. His declining and now lack of contributions has culminated in her regularly commenting, “We’re using my pay” or “my cash” for purchases. Instead of having free spending money or planning vacations to escape from and forget about work, her entire check goes to paying their bills, exacerbating her disappointment: “Perhaps the biggest casualty may be the fact that she has said she isn’t sure if she is ‘in love’ with me, though she knows she loves me. The sooner I find work, the sooner I can
begin to repair this part of our marriage.” He says Suzy feels entitled to cutting back to part-time work, “having supported me all these years.” Jonathan would like that but more realistically wants to land any paying job to stop the bleeding. Their multiyear ordeal has undermined their communication. Jonathan inquires about Suzy’s day so that he “gets a taste of adult interaction,” but they agreed not to discuss his unless he has good news.

Frank’s involuntary unemployment has disappointed himself and his wife, caused them to declare bankruptcy, and left him feeling out of control. His joblessness, he says, “opened up a lot of frustration and resentment on her part for having to work full-time.” Frank gained weight and began snoring loudly at night, interrupting his wife’s sleep. She became angry and resentful, he says, “so the window of opportunity to have quiet, peaceful moments together was dwindling pretty rapidly at that point.” Her anger was revealed at a friend’s barbeque where “the drinks were really starting to flow” and “she was just saying a lot of hurtful, hateful things” about him. Frank has a source of support and escape in his elementary school-age daughter, who is shielded from much of her parents’ problems. His parents also support him, both financially once in a while and emotionally during his troubles. Eventually, Frank channeled his frustrations into a blog that painstakingly documents his unemployment experiences. The blog was well received and led to a part-time writing position. It isn’t generating much income, but his wife proudly shares his deeply personal and revealing published work with everyone she knows.

Anthony ponders whether his unemployment may lead to a divorce: “I don’t know how much respect my wife has for me, I’ve got to be honest with you. I think she really feels [like] more of a caretaker with me than anything else. The sex life isn’t there.” His stress level has been reduced by his improved relationship with his daughter while being a stay-at-home dad and the inheritance he has to cushion him. And even though his marriage is not strong, Anthony says his wife has been “supportive and understanding” during his unemployment. “I’d have to say she’s been very supportive,” he says. “You know, she never laid any guilt upon me for the most part. Maybe one or two things were said here or there, but, really, you know, nothing out of the ordinary.” He also attends local unemployment support meetings and is active in online forums, which provide him with “comfort” and help.

Henry is in the middle of a bitter divorce. He is white, in his late 40s, and a stay-at-home dad of one high schooler and one middle schooler. He quit his job when his older daughter was born because his wife’s career was taking off and she had to move the family several times to follow promotions. Henry and his wife decided she earned enough and they wanted someone to be home with the kids, so he gladly accepted the responsibility. He says they were happy and all was well until their most recent move led his wife to work and spend
time with wealthier “right-wing ex-military types” who take fancy vacations. Her mentality shifted from “it’s our money” to “it’s her money and she makes all the decisions, and all of a sudden money became an issue.” He adds, “I guess the best way to describe it, she went from Mountain Girl, which would be like Jerry Garcia’s wife, to Sarah Palin in about three years.” He attributes some of this to their deteriorating relationship, but he still feels blindsided by her new attitude after years of being a stay-at-home dad:

She seems to think that all her success is just because of her. All of a sudden, she’s throwing that up in my face like, you know, “Be a real man.” You know, she’s throwing all this masculinity stuff in my face all of a sudden, “Oh, be a real man and go get a job,” and, “I can’t believe you’ve lived off your wife and you haven’t done anything for 15 years.” I think it’s not even the access to the money that disturbs me. It’s her unwillingness to acknowledge that, you know, I’ve sacrificed, too, and that... she would have never got this career if I wasn’t home watching [our kids] all the time when they were sick, taking them to school, taking care of the house, taking care of the dogs, taking care of her [live-in] mother. It’s like all of a sudden, everything I did doesn’t matter, you know.

Henry has lost his partner’s support, which he finds ironic and disturbing given their long-standing family arrangement. Now, with no paid work experience for years and a body that will no longer allow him to do the blue-collar work he did in his 20s, he must begin anew. He is fortunate to have strong financial and emotional support from his large family and friends. Henry is proud of the children he has raised and no longer looks to his soon-to-be ex-wife for support.

The single unemployed men I interview are mostly younger, in their 20s and 30s, and somewhat dependent on their families financially. They seem to rely more on their peers for social support. The recession’s toll on youth unemployment means they all have friends who are underemployed or unemployed. In 2012, half of new college graduates were either underemployed (e.g., baristas and restaurant workers) or unemployed, not to mention drowning in more student debt than previous generations. Parents and family often criticize younger people, not recognizing the unique circumstances this generation faces: high unemployment and fewer entry-level positions that provide opportunities for advancement, heavy school debt, lack of affordable housing.

Jordan, a white, 25-year-old recent graduate living with his parents, says his four-year degree has left him with nothing but debt. His parents wondered why he was pursuing unpaid internships instead of jobs, but he found even entry-level jobs require more work experience than he has: “To them getting a job is easy and I was simply being either lazy or holding out for the dream
job.” Overall, though, he is appreciative of his parents’ support. They are paying down his debt, helping him pursue a physical therapy degree, and they have become more empathetic after his father briefly had to contend with the job market. Jordan relies on his friends, who “are sympathetic because many of them are living the same employment struggle as I am.”

Tyler, fresh out of incarceration and living in the halfway house, says his parents have been supportive. They gave him money when he needed it in jail and help him now that he’s out. But they remind him “pretty much every time” he talks to them that he screwed up and threw it all away: “That makes me feel like crap, [but then] they’ll send me money.” He also remains close with his ex-wife’s family. Tyler has his young children and clings to the hope of restoring his marriage. Meanwhile, he relies on others’ social support during his financially and emotionally difficult transition back into society and the workforce.

With the exception of Henry, whose wife has changed her mind about their breadwinner-caretaker arrangement, all the voluntary stay-at-home dads enjoy strong support from their partners and often their friends and close family as well. Nick, a white father of two young boys in his 30s, quit his middle school teaching job to raise his kids because his wife’s law practice allows him to stay at home. Nick’s wife has “always been good about saying ‘we’ or ‘our,’ as far as paychecks and money go,” he says, and he actually pays the bills, which helps him deal with not earning his own paycheck. His parents and in-laws appreciate what he does. He says his friends are supportive, some even “jealous” but mostly out of ignorance, thinking “the grass is always greener on the other side.” Nick says he occasionally calls on “some old buddies [who have kids] and I’ll cry on their shoulders over the phone about some of the [difficulties of at-home parenting]. And they’re pretty understanding, saying ‘Yeah my wife went through a lot of that stuff, too,’” which makes him feel better.

When Peter finally quit his part-time job after his wife’s career took them to a new state, he relied on her emotional support to navigate the transition. Regina, he believes, was trying to ease his fears of losing what was essentially his life: “I don’t know how else to say it, but that was my life. That’s who Peter was . . . [it’s] what defines me.” He gave up his career for her even better one. She in turn appreciates his sacrifice and raising of their children. Peter says his marriage is even stronger than before, although he suspects his insecurities can be tiresome.

Rob is taking a break from his highly specialized and well-compensated engineering work. He left a multinational corporation to join a fledgling start-up but “it went belly up.” He and his wife decided Rob should raise their sons until they are school age before Rob returns to his career. He says everyone in his family is supportive, that their attitude is, “Hey, if you can’t [work right
now then], this is your next job; taking care of your family is job number one.” He says even his “kind of old-school” 74-year-old father is supportive. Even though the area he lives in outside of D.C. has a culture where “men are always the breadwinners and the women always stay at home and have babies and all this other crap,” he has found a large, active stay-at-home dads’ group that has also been essential for his transition: “The support from that type of group really helped and kind of got my head refocused on what’s important and what’s not that important. Up to that time I was thinking, ‘Oh, we’ve got to [ earn] this much money, we’ve got to pay for this and all that,’ and then after talking to [ another stay-at-home dad] and thinking about it, I’m going like, ‘You know, having my wife and kids [ be] happy even if I’m not making money is fine; if we’re OK financially then why not?’ Basically the support from the group is what really, really helped.”

Marcus’s unplanned unemployment and turn as a stay-at-home dad is made easier by his wife, Angela: “The strength of my wife—she’s my strongest supporter, so I have no regrets or qualms about that. Without my wife, I don’t know how I’d make it sometimes.” Marcus has shared his feelings of vulnerability with her as he struggles with unemployment. He says,

Sometimes you have to show no weakness outside of your own door. But when you’re inside your own door, you have to show actually some weakness, because you’re an individual. Especially if you’re married. I mean, you can’t be tough all the time. You can’t always be tough. You can’t always have that same rocky exterior. Sometimes you have to show that you’re soft as marshmallows on the inside. And it helps you. I mean, for a long... For a period of time, I bottled stuff up. And I learned to let it go now. I learned you can’t keep it all in.

Angela has become the breadwinner, Marcus the primary caretaker, and they support each other as they prepare to welcome a second child into their family and Marcus tries to find work.

With a flourishing career, Cindy doesn’t expect Phil to be the breadwinner, and he in turn does everything he can around the house so she is relieved of that work. “The traditional breadwinner, that was my role, and now it’s 100% reversed,” he says. “You know, she’s been incredibly gracious in this whole thing. She understands. She’s always trying to reinforce me because she said, ‘Look, I work with people every day that are idiots.’ She’s like, ‘I don’t know how they have jobs and you don’t.’” Phil describes his wife as his “rock” and wonders how single unemployed men endure the experience alone. He also regularly meets up with several other unemployed men to get out of the house, socialize, complain, and commiserate. There is a networking aspect to the group, but that’s not its primary purpose. Phil says they go to a bar, have
some food and a beer and speak their minds: “There’s no airs that are put on. You know, you want to sit and cuss and say, ‘I’m so fucking pissed off I can’t believe what’s happening,’ go ahead. That’s great, that’s why we’re there.”

Outside of the group, Phil says, unemployment just isn’t discussed. People find it depressing. The topic is hidden. “You know, it’s almost the third rail of polite discussion,” he says. “One is religion, two is politics and three is unemployment.” For Phil and other non-breadwinners, the support of partners, family, friends, and online and in-person groups provides them with social and emotional connections that reduce the effects of their failing to live up to adult men’s foremost ideal. Without such support, these men are more susceptible to enduring personal problems and contributing to social problems.