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# **Where are the Men?**

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## Coors Fellowship for Economic Mobility

The Coors Fellowship for Economic Mobility focuses on issues that stifle greater economic independence of the individual and embrace tried-and-true economic principles of free enterprise centered around choice, access, and competition. The fellowship is designed to spur thoughtful policy discussion and potential solutions around the economic and fiscal ramifications of increasing workforce opportunities, with a focus on increasing economic prosperity of all workers.

Named in honor of the Coors family, the fellowship pays tribute to the vision, hard work, true grit, relentless determination, and fearless innovation that were the hallmarks of the pioneering spirit that characterized the success of the men and women who founded Colorado as the place where opportunity abounds. Providing that same opportunity for individuals and families to prosper, grow and achieve their dream today, just as our founders did, is at the heart of the Coors Fellowship and the legacy of that family name.

### About the Authors



**Tamra Ryan** is the 2023 Coors Fellow for Economic Mobility at the Common Sense Institute. She is the CEO of the Women's Bean Project, a social enterprise providing transitional employment in its food manufacturing business to women attempting to break the cycle of chronic unemployment and poverty.

Tamra is a former partner and board member for Social Venture Partners-Denver and Social Enterprise Alliance. Congressman Mike Coffman (R-CO) recognized Tamra's servant leadership and entered it into the Congressional Record of the 115th Congress, Second Session in May 2018. She was honored by the Colorado Women's Chamber of Commerce as one of the Top 25 Most Powerful Women in Colorado, and in 2022 and 2023 as a Titan100 CEO and Social Entrepreneur of the year by the Colorado Institute for Social Impact. She was a presenter at TEDxMilehigh and is a highly sought-after speaker for topics such as compassionate leadership and social enterprise.



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Cole Anderson is a Research Analyst with Common Sense Institute. He is an alum of the University of Denver where he graduated with a double-major in Public Policy and Economics. His work covers a range of issues including homelessness, crime, inflation, housing, and the job market.

## *About Common Sense Institute*

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**Common Sense Institute** is a non-partisan research organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of our economy. As a leading voice for free enterprise, CSI's mission is to examine the fiscal impacts of policies, laws, and to educate voters on issues that impact their lives.

CSI's founders were a concerned group of business and community leaders who observed that divisive partisanship was overwhelming policymaking and believed that sound economic analysis could help people make fact-based and common sense decisions.

CSI employs rigorous research techniques and dynamic modeling to evaluate the potential impact of these measures on the Colorado economy and individual opportunity.

## *Teams & Fellows Statement*

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CSI is committed to independent, in-depth research that examines the impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Coloradans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI's commitment to institutional independence is rooted in the individual independence of our researchers, economists, and fellows. At the core of CSI's mission is belief in the power of the free enterprise system. CSI's work explores ideas that protect and promote jobs and the economy, and the CSI team and fellows take part in this pursuit with academic freedom. The CSI team's work is guided by data-driven research and evidence.

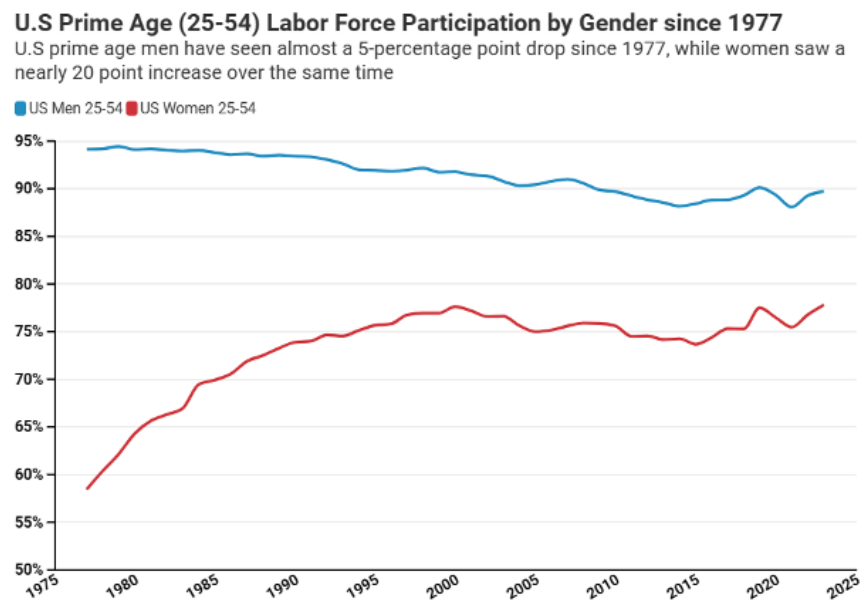
The views and opinions of fellows do not reflect the institutional views of CSI. CSI operates independently of any political party and does not take positions.

# Introduction

While women are leading the post-pandemic labor force recovery with the highest participation rates ever recorded, men’s rates continue to lag. Over the past 50 years, the labor force participation rate (LFPR) for U.S. prime-working age men dropped over 4.4 percentage points to its current level of 89.7%. This drop translates to about 7 million prime-age men who are out of the workforce nationally.<sup>i</sup> Though the labor force participation rate for prime working-age men is higher in Colorado, it has dropped at a faster rate since the financial crisis.

Meanwhile, the U.S. prime working-age female LFPR has risen from 58.4% in 1977 to the current rate of 77.8%.<sup>ii</sup> Despite being the highest ever women’s LFPR, this trend presents new challenges. A previous CSI report, “The She-session is Over, but What’s Next for Women in the Workforce,” examined these challenges and offered policy opportunities to encourage women’s workforce entry and longevity.<sup>iii</sup>

*Figure 1*



# Key Findings

- The labor force participation rate for prime working-age men in Colorado has declined by 1.97 percentage points since 2007, preceding the financial crisis. If the LFPR rate had stayed level, there would be 23,591 more prime working-age men in the workforce today. This is equivalent to losing one-third of a graduating class of high school seniors. If all these men were to enter the labor force it would increase the state’s recent average annual labor force growth of approximately 40,000 individuals by 50%.
- The decline in the LFPR for prime-age Colorado men follows national trends and is a result of multiple factors. The population’s overall aging has played a role as have other important factors such as the composition and educational requirements of jobs, family lives, real wages, and cultural changes.
- While Colorado’s LFPR of prime age men is still above the national rate, it has declined more rapidly relative to the U.S. Since 2007, prime-age male LFPR dropped 1.97 percentage points compared to the U.S. 1.22-point decline.

## Workforce Participation Trends in the U.S. for Prime Working-Age Men

In 2023 the overall labor force participation rate (LFPR) for prime working-age individuals between 25-54 was the highest since January 2007.<sup>iv</sup> However, this surge was driven by women, as the U.S. male LFPR has been on the decline since the 1970s, around the same time women began moving into the workforce in higher numbers. In 1977 the LFPR of prime working-age men was 94.2%. In 2023, the U.S. male LFPR nationally sat at 89.7%.<sup>v</sup>

Those outside the labor force, referred to as NILFs (not in labor force), are not employed, nor are they looking for employment. Men in the NILF group do not include most school-age people, elderly, those in the military, or homemakers. When women are out of the workforce, they typically indicate their reasons to be related to caring for the home or another family member. Men are more likely to say they are not working because of school, a disability, or an illness. NILF men are typically unmarried with no children, have lower educational attainment, and are more likely to say they are going to school, even if they are not enrolled.

Across the country, prime working-age men's declining attachment to the labor force is concerning and is impacting the economy through unfilled jobs and social ills. This trend does not represent a snapshot in time. Typically, men who were not working when they were interviewed were also unlikely to have worked in the previous year.<sup>vi</sup> Prime working-age men in Colorado have also experienced a downward trend in labor force participation, though not as low, and there are likely characteristics traditionally found in Colorado's population that are preventing a more dramatic slide. The time is now to ensure Colorado men stay employed and connected to the workforce.

National unemployment rate appears to be low partly because for every unemployed prime-age American man looking for a job, there are over four neither working nor looking for work. Nationally, roughly 7 million prime working-age men are NILF today.<sup>vii</sup>

In lieu of work, an increasing number of men rely on Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) payments and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), often referred to as food stamps.<sup>viii</sup> Though Colorado prime working-age men's NILF rate is lower than the national average, it has increased from 5.5% in 2007 to 7.47% in 2023, a growth of 35.8%. If Colorado follows the national trend, it will result in decreased ability to fill open positions and create a negative impact on state GDP, while also straining the public benefits system. Looking only at the total male LFPR can be deceptive and merits further examination by race and ethnicity, educational attainment, marital status, and fatherhood to better understand who is and who is not working.

*Across the country, prime working-age men's declining attachment to the labor force is concerning and is impacting the economy through unfilled jobs and social ills.*

# Factors Contributing to Men Leaving the Workforce

## Educational Attainment

Higher education levels can lead to higher pay and decrease the likelihood one will leave the workforce. Men who are not college-educated are leaving the workforce at higher rates than men who are. Indeed, the decline in male LFPR is almost entirely concentrated with men who have a high school diploma or less, likely due to a lower demand for labor from men who are less educated.<sup>ix</sup> Today, as many as one in three American men with only a high school diploma is out of the labor force.<sup>x</sup> Men have been falling behind in educational attainment in the U.S. In the 2018-2019 academic year, for every 100 college degrees awarded to women, 74 were awarded to men. This is reverse the relationship prior to 1972 when Title IX was enacted to help women and girls have equal access to resources in schools.<sup>xii</sup>

**Figure 2** below includes data for the U.S. showing the relationship between education levels and employment over time.<sup>xiii</sup>

Figure 2

U.S. Prime-Age Men LFPR by Educational Attainment				
	Men with no HS completion	Men with HS completion	Men with some education after HS	Men with full college
<b>1972</b>	94.18%	96.79%	96.38%	97.07%
<b>2000</b>	81.68%	91.16%	91.40%	95.69%
<b>2023</b>	80.97%	85.77%	87.64%	94.05%

## Wages

Real wages for men have shifted as well. Wages for man with a high school diploma in 2019 were 14% lower than in 1979. Unfortunately, this is not entirely an education-related issue. The inflation-adjusted wages for most men were lower in 2019 than in 1979.<sup>xiv</sup> The decline in real earnings for non-college educated men over the past several decades has increased the likelihood of leaving the workforce, and accounts for 44% of the total growth in labor force exit.<sup>xv</sup> Trends in manufacturing, toward trade and technology, and away from less skilled labor has decreased the demand for male workers with less education and lower skill levels. It's not that men are not working because there are no jobs. It is because for many men outside the labor force there are jobs for which they are not skilled or trained.

## Men Without Children and Family Structure

Concerningly, men without children participate in the labor force at a lower rate than men with children. In 2023, U.S. men aged 25-54 with kids had an LFPR of 92.3% while men without children had an LFPR of just 85.6%.<sup>xvi</sup> In general, unmarried men without children are less likely to be working than married men or men with children. This is particularly true for men who do not have education or training after high school.

Figure 3

2023 U.S. LFPR for Men Ages 25-54 with Kids and Without		
	Men with kids	Men without kids
2023	92.3%	85.6%

Birth family structure matters as well. Males born to teen mothers are much more likely to be nonworkers. Having a mother with a higher level of educational attainment decreases the likelihood of being a nonworker. Additionally, growing up in a poor neighborhood increases the likelihood of being a nonworker, as does growing up with just one parent.<sup>xvii</sup>

### Other Factors

Non-Hispanic white men ages 25-54 who receive low pay exit the workforce at a greater rate than non-Hispanic black men and Hispanic men. Hispanic men are more likely than average to be in the workforce. Native American men and Black men are more likely to be NILF.<sup>xviii</sup> Additionally, native born men are more likely to be NILF than immigrant men. By contrast, foreign-born women have a lower LFPR than native-born women.<sup>xix</sup>

Formerly incarcerated prime working-age men have an overall unemployment rate of 27%, higher than the peak unemployment rate during the Great Depression.<sup>xx</sup> This “prison penalty” is greater for formerly incarcerated people of color.<sup>xxi</sup> Across the U.S., black men are six times more likely to be incarcerated.<sup>xxii</sup> Formerly incarcerated people also tend to have a lower education level with only 4% of formerly incarcerated people having a college degree, compared to 29% of the general public.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The U.S. male life expectancy has also dropped as the rate of deaths of despair has increased. This has accompanied reduced labor force participation rates, lower marriage rates, and increased reports of poor physical and mental health.<sup>xxiv</sup> Previously men were most likely to succumb to cardiovascular disease, cancer, strokes, or lung disease; however, today, the incidence of deaths from drugs, alcohol, and suicide are on the rise.<sup>xxv</sup> Employment is not only a source of income, but also dignity, belonging, and self-respect. The loss of work and possibilities for career advancement can lead to disconnection, hopelessness, and negative emotions that bring both physical and psychological pain.<sup>xxvi</sup> On average, women in the U.S. now live 5.8 years longer than men. As recently as 2010, the gap between male and female life expectancy was only 4.8 years.<sup>xxvii</sup>



## What About Men in Colorado?

Interestingly, Colorado men are faring better in labor force participation than men in the U.S. overall. Though the LFPR for men in Colorado has declined over the past several decades, even while the female LFPR has increased, the drop has not been as dramatic as the average across the U.S. In 2023, the LFPR for Colorado men 25-54 was 92.5%, while the national LFPR for men was just 89.7%.<sup>xxviii</sup> In Colorado, 7.5% of prime working-age men were NILF in 2023, which compares favorably to the U.S. rate of over 10%.

Despite this, since 2007, Colorado has outpaced the nation in the rate of its male prime-age workforce becoming NILFs. While Colorado’s LFPR of prime age men is still above the national rate, it has declined more rapidly relative to the U.S. Since 2007, prime-age male LFPR dropped 1.97 percentage points compared to the U.S. 1.22-point decline. This decline in male prime-age LFPR means an additional 23,591 prime working-age men in Colorado are NILF today. Nationally, the decline translates to 817,997 additional prime working-age men outside the labor force.

Figure 4

**Colorado Prime Age (25-54) Labor Force Participation by Gender since 1977**  
Colorado prime age men have seen a 3-percentage point drop since 1977, while women saw a nearly 20 point increase over the same time

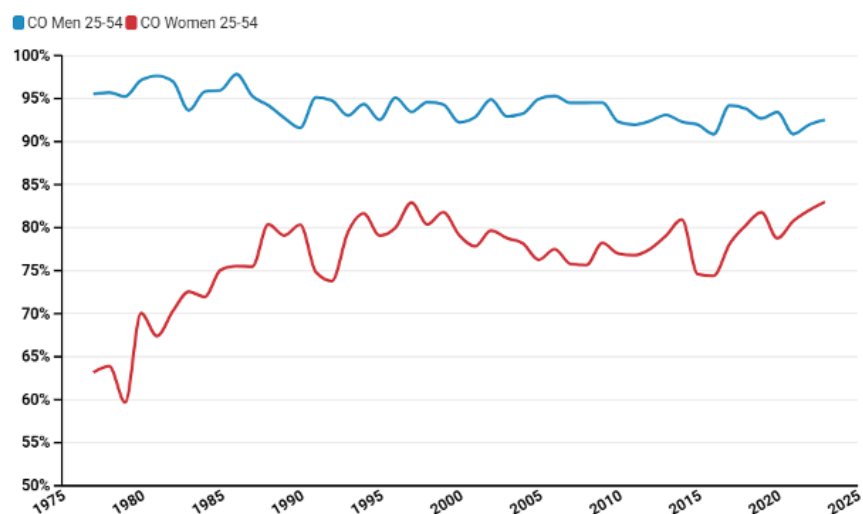


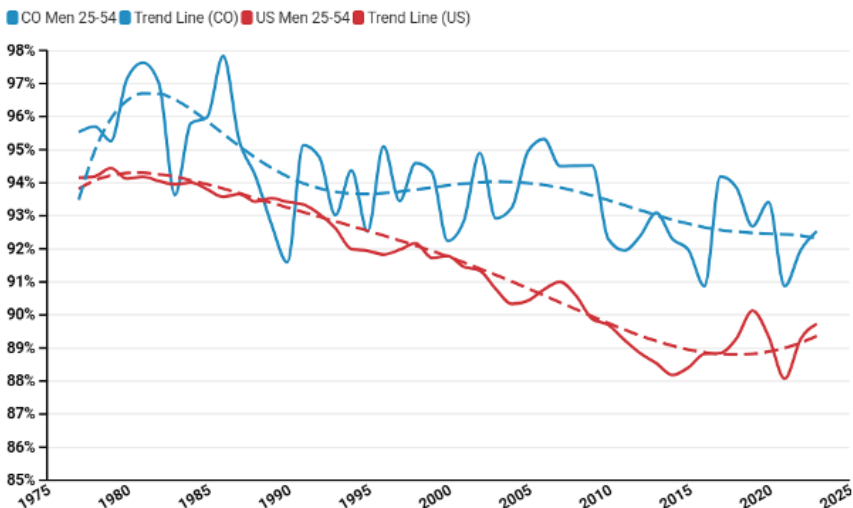
Figure 5

NILF Growth Among Prime Working-Age Men in Colorado and U.S. (2007 vs 2023)							
	2007 LFPR	2023 LFPR	Percentage Point LFPR Change	Total Average NILFs in Given Month in 2007	NILFs Added Since 2007	Total Average NILFs in Given Month in 2023	Growth of NILFs between 2007 and 2023
<b>Colorado</b>	94.50%	92.53%	-1.97	62,185	23,591	89,454	43.9%
<b>U.S.</b>	91.99%	89.73%	-1.22	5,625,037	817,997	6,614,827	17.6%

Figure 6

**Colorado & U.S Prime Age Men (25-54) Labor Force Participation 1977-2023**

Colorado prime age men have seen a 3-percentage point drop in LFPR since 1977, while U.S prime age men have decreased 4.4 points over the same period



## Educational Attainment

There are several characteristics of Colorado workers that are likely leading to these better-than-average numbers.

**Figure 7** shows labor force participation rate data for prime working-age men by education level between 2000 and 2023. Prime working-age men with college degrees are employed at a higher rate in 2023.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Colorado historically has a better educated population than the national average, with 42% of the state’s residents having a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2022.<sup>xxx</sup> However, many of these highly educated residents arrived through in-migration. For homegrown Coloradans, the rate of pursuing education beyond high school is lower than the national average by ten percentage points.<sup>xxxi</sup> This is not to say that everyone needs a college education, but a skills gap in Colorado is documented and must be addressed. In 2020, 49% of jobs in Colorado required skills training beyond high school, but not a four-year degree, while only 39% of workers had those credentials to fill available jobs.<sup>xxxii</sup> By 2031, 73% of the jobs in Colorado are expected to require some postsecondary training beyond high school. Colorado ranks second among the states expected to have the largest share of jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree and 48th in the proportion of jobs for workers with a high school diploma.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Figure 7

<b>Colorado Prime-Age Men (25-54) LFPR by Educational Attainment</b>				
	<b>Men with no HS completion</b>	<b>Men with HS completion</b>	<b>Men with some education after HS</b>	<b>Men with full college</b>
<b>2000</b>	86.28%	90.17%	93.71%	94.61%
<b>2023</b>	88.06%	88.21%	86.97%	95.02%

\*LFPR data in Colorado before 2000 was inadequate due to sample size

## Men without Children

In Colorado, men without children participate in the labor force at a lower rate relative to men with children. In 2023, men aged 25-54 with kids had an LFPR of 94.7% while men without children had an LFPR of just 88.9%.

Figure 8

2023 LFPR For U.S. & Colorado Men Ages 25-54 with Kids and Without		
	Men with kids	Men without kids
Colorado Men	94.7%	88.9%
U.S. Men	92.3%	85.6%
Percentage Point Difference	2.4%	3.3%

## Other Factors

Regarding deaths of despair, Colorado men are struggling as well. Males in Colorado accounted for 77% of suicide deaths from 2010 to 2020. Sixty-two percent of opioid deaths were men in this same period.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Colorado has the 6th highest suicide rate in the country.<sup>xxxv</sup> Colorado has a documented mental health crisis, ranking 51st in the country for prevalence of mental illness and access to care among adults.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

## Implications and a Cautionary Tale

Upon hearing men are increasingly dropping out of the workforce while women are entering, the first thought might be that this is a story of role reversal in which men are taking care of the home and family. However, time use surveys of prime working-age NILF men reveal these men spend their time in activities defined as “socializing, relaxing, and leisure.” The studies find that NILF men spend, on average, 7.5 hours a day in these activities, including screen-based entertainment such as gaming and watching television.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Across the country, men who are not working rely increasingly on SSDI and SNAP, commonly known as food stamps. Three to five million male single person households receive SNAP, which unlike Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, also known as welfare), has no time limits or work requirements. A change in this policy could help send the message that SNAP and SSDI are not intended to be long-term solutions.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

In 2022, SSDI supported 1.6 million prime working-age men nationally. In 1985 the entire caseload (all ages) for men on SSDI was 1.8 million.<sup>xxxix</sup> Originally intended for aging workers who were clearly unable to work, today SSDI is received by workers of all ages who have decreased employment capacity. Declining income prospects for lower skill workers has led to the growth in use of SSDI as a primary source of income. However, many could work at least some hours, particularly because advances in medical treatment have allowed the possibility of addressing issues that sidelined workers in the past. Often the time needed for qualifying for SSDI can be long – up to several years, during which one may not work. Presumably, some portion of these men could move into the workforce with adequate skills retraining and incentives. Work requirements and better screening could help to ensure men are encouraged to get back to work if they are able.

While Colorado men are faring better in terms of LFPR, trends in the state indicate the importance of monitoring what is happening across the U.S. to avoid a more precipitous decline in LFPR for prime working-age men in the state. For men who do not work in their prime years, there are significant implications on their future work and earnings potential as well as their well-being in later years. NILF men who are not paying into social security or putting money away from wages for retirement risk living in poverty during their later years.

A growing labor force is a major factor in the growth of GDP. Already Colorado is experiencing a labor shortage; with 2.2 jobs for every person seeking employment, the state currently has an excess labor demand. Though this is not the only cause of the current inflationary environment, the tight labor market is proving to be a persistent challenge. “A better balance between labor demand and supply will be necessary to control inflation.”<sup>xl</sup> While Colorado’s economy has been outperforming much of the rest of the country, a labor shortage will impact the state’s competitiveness.

In-migration to the state has declined over the past several years and is expected to continue to decline until 2050. We are already losing labor force participation as the population ages. Can we afford to lose prime working-age men?

As Colorado’s rate of men leaving the labor force is accelerating faster than the U.S. average, we must consider how to prevent a further decline in Colorado.

## Considerations

In Colorado, efforts should include helping men adapt to jobs currently in the workforce, and more importantly, jobs of the future. This includes jobs in healthcare, education, mental health, and social work careers where the number of men has declined precipitously in recent decades, even though boys and men are over-represented in groups needing services such as substance abuse counseling or special needs education.<sup>xli</sup>

In 2021 the Global Initiative on Boys & Men issued a report recommending a Colorado Commission on the Status of Men and Boys be created in Colorado.<sup>xlii</sup> This report addressed the challenges uniquely facing boys and men, including mental and physical health, educational attainment, and employment status. This is not a recommendation to deny the progress made for women, but to address the downward trends for boys and men that are affecting their ability to contribute to the success of our communities. Legislation could authorize a Commission here in Colorado to study this important topic.

Men are 91% of the incarcerated population in Colorado and would benefit from employers embracing second chance hiring. Though a future paper will discuss this topic in more detail, 82% of managers report that individuals with criminal records perform the same or better than employees without criminal records. Additionally, second chance hires have demonstrated themselves to be highly loyal and productive employees.<sup>xliii</sup>

There are some federal initiatives that could help get men back to work and prevent more from leaving. In 1996, the welfare reform law was largely focused on promoting work and creating lifetime limits on benefits to help families, more specifically mothers, move out of poverty. As a result, millions of women moved into the workforce and child poverty fell. However, men generally do not qualify for the same cash assistance programs as women, particularly those with children. Changing the requirements for qualifying for SSDI and SNAP to include work requirements for individuals at whatever level is possible could help address the growth in the use of SSDI and SNAP to replace earned income.

Additionally, Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is one program which has shown to motivate employment for workers with modest incomes. However, the current EITC rules disincentivize marriage by considering a couple's combined income and thus, decreasing their tax credit. Changes to the EITC to allow married couples to apply for EITC based on their individual incomes would help families and help men because married men's rate of work is higher.<sup>xliv</sup>

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