All Play and No Work Makes Johnny a Poor Boy

I was eight years old when I began working six days a week, fifty two weeks a year delivering newspapers. By age 13, I had two jobs. I worked through high school and college. No, this isn’t the 1930’s I’m referring to but the 1980’s and 90’s. Times, they are a changing – particularly for our nation’s young men.

A couple big trends are emerging. The first is that kids these days are working less than ever, and not just because they are attending college. Fewer look for jobs, and fewer who do can find them than in the past. The second trend is that young men are less likely to look for or find work than their female counterparts. Young men also are less likely to attend college than their female peers.

The following statistics are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ data release last week regarding 2011 high school graduates.

* 68.3% of 2011 high school graduates were enrolled in colleges or universities (down from 70.1% in October 2009)
* The unemployment rate for recent high school grads not in college is 33.6% compared to 21.1% for recent graduates attending college.
* 68.7% of high school graduates were in the work force compared to 38.8% of those enrolled in college
* Female high school graduates are more likely than their male counterparts to go to college (72.3% to 64.6%). Of those college attendees, women were also more likely to look for or have a job than their male counterparts (41% to 36.5%).
* For high school dropouts, the labor force participation rate was only 55.5% along with a 38.4% unemployment rate.

The above data reveal that fewer than half of 2011 high school graduates who didn’t attend college actually have a job (only 68..3% want a job and of that a third don’t have one). Only a third of high school dropouts have jobs. What are these young people doing if they neither go to work nor go to school?

Fewer young people may want to work because their families have increased wealth over previous generations. Why work if Mom and Dad will give you everything you want? Fewer young people may be getting hired because of increases in state and federal minimum wages. The federal minimum wage has gone from $3.35 an hour in 1990 (when I began working at a local movie theater) to $7.25 an hour by 2009. When wage increases outpace increases in worker productivity, unemployment increases.

Perhaps the expansion of government funded student loans has contributed to a decrease in work. Surely student loan rates would not be so high if more students worked during high school or college to pay for college. The President’s response has been to tour college campuses and promise cheaper loans with fewer penalties for defaulting (at taxpayer expense). That will only depress young people’s desire to look for work.

When a generation of new college graduates has no work experience, it doesn’t bode well for their future employment. Perhaps this is why half of new college graduates are jobless or underemployed. It is important to show perspective employers that one has a history of showing up for work and working hard. Job prospects are even harder for recent graduates in the arts and humanities who face higher unemployment rates than those in business or health. Whoever is telling students to not work, take out student loans, and major in fields that don’t prepare people for jobs that are in demand, is doing them a disservice.

The economic picture is even worse for young men. In 2010, women aged 16-19 were more likely than their male counterparts to be in the labor force. From 1990 through 2010, male labor force participation fell from 76.4% to 71.2% as female labor force participation rates increased from 57.5% to 58.6%. Male unemployment for men over 20 years of age was 8.3% in March 2012 compared to 7.2% for women of the same age. Young women are more likely than young men to look for jobs, have jobs, and attain a college degree.

If this pace holds, this will be the first generation of women in US history to outpace men in the labor force. Women without children under the age of 30 now out earn their male counterparts. For those women who choose to have children under the age of 30, most births occur outside of marriage. Today’s young men are working less than women, going to school less than women, and not marrying the mothers of their children. What happened that the US no long raises responsible young men? Surely this has implications for the long run health (or lack thereof) of the US economy. No wonder people are beginning to question America’s crisis of character.