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Lost boys

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Lost Boys



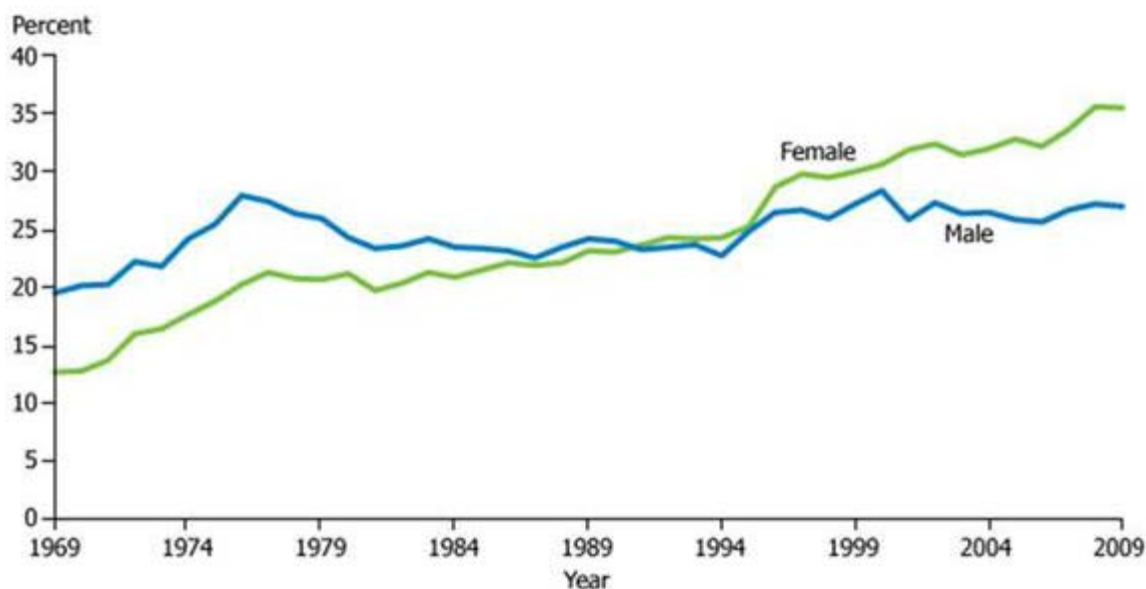
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The **financial challenges** of higher education get a great deal of press and the occasionally outrageous antics **of some on campuses** are the subject of amusement and derision to those outside the academy. But to economists and many others, the gender gap in higher education is arguably the most important social concern for millennials and our country as it has implications for decades after current undergraduates leave the “academic bubble.”

For most of educational history, men significantly outnumbered women in higher education. As attitudes changed and barriers to women’s education fell, the gap slowly closed. By the late 1970s **women outnumbered men** in college enrollment and by the early

1990s a greater percentage of young women in the workforce had bachelor’s degrees than young men, as the chart below shows:

Percent of U.S. Adults Ages 25-29 With a Bachelor’s Degree or Higher, 1969-2009



Source: [PRB analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau.](#)

The trend continues today as nearly **60% of undergraduates are women**. Since I think it is safe to say that colleges and universities are not actively engaging in discrimination against young men, this demographic reality is largely a function of the behavior and choices of young men.

Surely some of the **challenges start early in their schooling** where the behavior of distractible, energetic and less focused boys result in disciplinary challenges, fairly or not, while attentive and well-disciplined girls thrive. Those in the K-12 system could say much more about these challenges than those of us in higher education, but we are all well aware of the achievement gap between the genders. (These gaps are even greater across racial and ethnic groups, but that is another topic.)

Interestingly, technology seems to potentially have made these issues worse by giving young men more choices than they had a generation ago. A recent **Atlantic article** asks an important question, “What are young, non-working men doing—once they have decided education is not the path for them?” Derek Thompson writes:

As for what they’re doing all day, Erik Hurst, an economist at the University of Chicago, is now conducting research that suggests that non-college men who aren’t in the labor market are spending a considerable amount of their time in front of screens.

In a University of Chicago faculty profile, Hurst **provides more detail** about his initial research into the role of technology on labor supply:

I’m...beginning with a hard look at time-use by young men with less than a four-year degree. In the 2000s, employment rates for this group dropped sharply – more than in any other group. We have determined that, in general, they are not going back to school or switching careers, so what are they doing with their time? The hours that they are not working have been replaced almost one for one with leisure time. Seventy-five percent of this new leisure time falls into one category: video games. The average low-skilled, unemployed man in this group plays video games an average of 12, and sometimes upwards of 30 hours per week. This change marks a relatively major shift that makes me question its effect on their attachment to the labor market.

To answer that question, I researched what fraction of these unemployed gamers from 2000 were also idle the previous year. A staggering 22% – almost one quarter – of unemployed young men did not work the previous year either.

What is particularly interesting about this phenomenon is how it affects the young men psychologically. To be unemployed in a capitalist economy is normally a devastating experience. With little income, few non-family relationships and none of the traditional professional sources of meaning and self-worth, to be out of the workforce, especially for men, is usually **a deeply stressful experience**.

Yet, as Thompson notes in his *Atlantic* article, according to Hurst’s research, the gamers “are having fun.” Technology has made leisure so cheap “that it apparently doesn’t require a steady W-2 or 1099 to have fun.”

As Hurst describes the evidence in the University of Chicago profile:

These individuals are living with parents or relatives, and happiness surveys actually indicate that they are quite content compared to their peers, making it hard to argue that some sort of constraint, like they are miserable because they can't find a job, is causing them to play video games. And they are having fun, Hurst emphasized. "Happiness surveys actually indicate that they

[are] quite content compared to their peers." In the short run, not working doesn't seem to make men miserable at all.

The issue, of course, for these young men and society, is not the short run but the long run. Again, the *Atlantic*:

Cheap and abundant entertainment anesthetizes less-skilled and less-educated young men in the present. But in the long run, it cuts them off from the same things that provide meaning in middle age, according to psychological and longitudinal studies—a career, a family, and a sense of accomplishment. The problem is that these 20-year-olds will eventually be 30-year-olds and 40-year-olds, and although young men who don't go to college might appear happy now, those same satisfaction studies suggest that they will be much less happy in their 30s and 40s—less likely to get married, and more likely to be in poverty.

The Lost Boys in J.M Barrie's play *Peter Pan* and the Disney films based on the play, live in Neverland and don't want to grow up. For young men without a college degree, however, the U. S economy is not as gentle a place as Neverland, Captain Hook notwithstanding. Saint John's University and schools like it do a good job of engaging and educating the young men that choose to enroll, but we as a nation need to figure out early in their lives how to educationally engage more of our Lost Boys, both for their sake and for the broader macro economy.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | August 18th, 2016 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).