

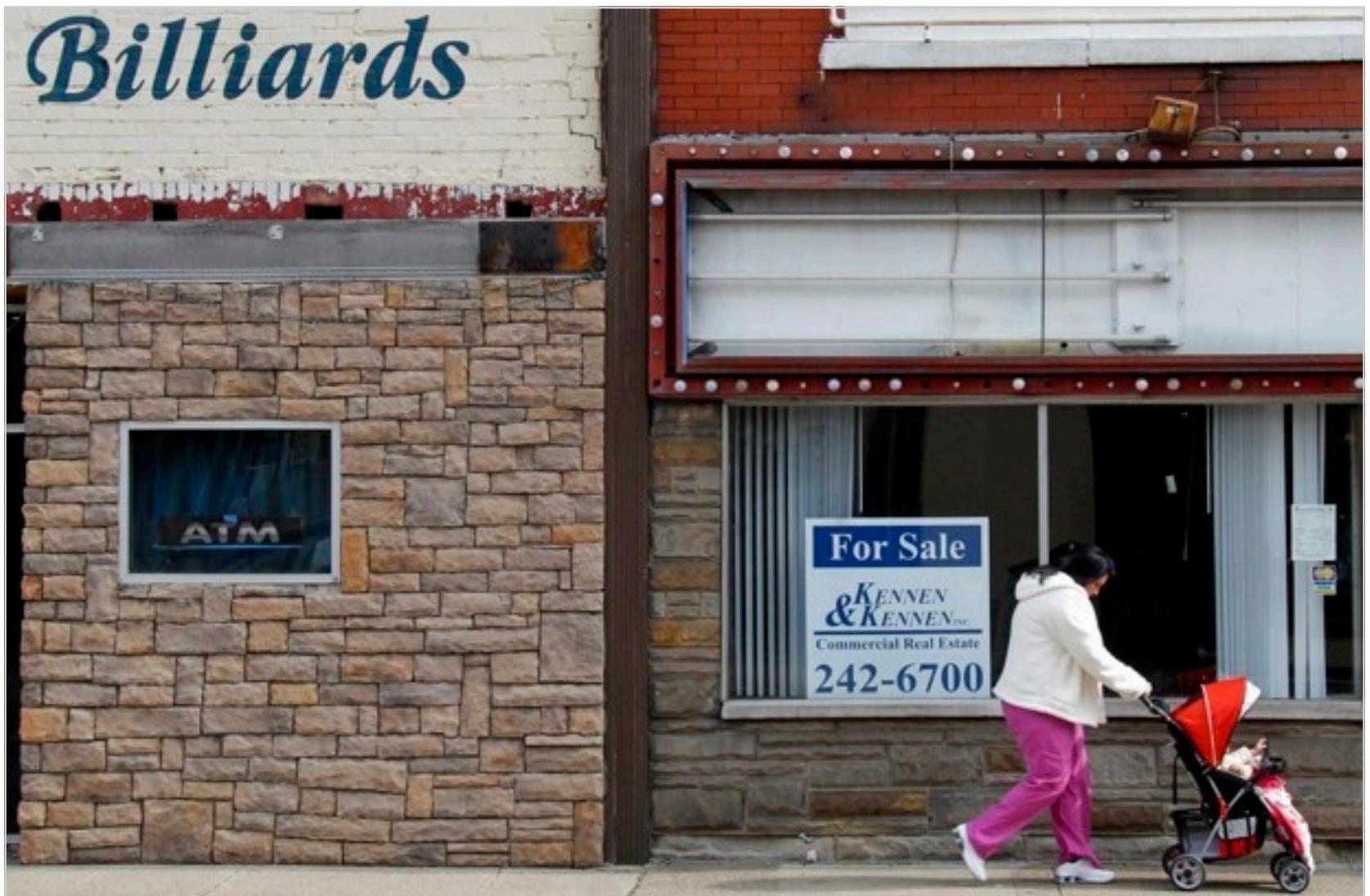
From The Atlantic

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The Lonely Women of the Rust Belt

The disappearance of manufacturing and the rise of opioid abuse has hit men in the Rust Belt hard. That's meant women are left to pick up the pieces.

ALANA SEMUELS | [@AlanaSemuels](#) | May 10, 2017 | 2 Comments



A woman pushes a baby carriage in the Rust Belt town of Wheeling, West Virginia. (Jason Cohn/Reuters)

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CHILLICOTHE, Ohio—Heroin robbed Tracey Kemper-Hermann of her husband, and sometimes she misses him most when she's trying to start her lawnmower. Her husband, Jason, had his own special trick to getting the finicky machine running, and since his death in 2014, the responsibility of cutting the grass has fallen to Kemper-Hermann. She's accumulated other tasks too, like a sherpa adding more and more weight until her back might break. It's not just figuring out how to support a family on one income. She has to change the flat tire on her daughter's 2004 Dodge Neon, and navigate the difficulties of parenting, like deciding what to say when her daughter, now 17, comes downstairs wearing shorts that are just too short. "She's a super good kid, but if she doesn't come home when she's supposed to, I think to him, 'Why did you leave me alone with a teenager?'"

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Men were once the primary breadwinners in areas like Ross County, where they worked good manufacturing jobs and came home at the end of the day to wives like Kemper-Hermann, who sometimes worked, but sometimes stayed home. But today in Ross County, manufacturing jobs have been outsourced or automated, and men have more time on their hands and less income to support their families. Some have turned to alcohol or drugs to fill their time—Ross County is one of the areas of Ohio hit hardest by the opioid epidemic—and are dying early of drug overdoses or other health problems. Others are just spending more and more time watching TV and playing video games. Women like Kemper-Hermann are left to raise children, work full-time jobs, and generally pick up the pieces of a region ravaged by the opioid epidemic and the decline of manufacturing.

RELATED STORY



When Factory Jobs Vanish, Men Become Less Desirable Partners

In a 2010 [cover story](#) in this magazine, Hanna Rosin predicted “The End of Men,” arguing that a post-industrial society, in which manual-labor jobs are disappearing and those requiring nurturing and communication skills are

growing, is more suited to women than to men. At the time that Rosin was writing, women held more than half of managerial and professional jobs in the country, and their share was growing in fields like medicine and law. They earned nearly 60 percent of all bachelor's degrees in the country, 60 percent of master's degrees, and 42 percent of all MBAs. Women, she wrote, would soon be in the position that men once were: running more companies, supporting families, and sometimes, deciding not to seek a partner and going it alone.

Recent data is bearing out Rosin's predictions. But this role reversal is often not a positive one. For many women, going it alone has meant poverty and loneliness, not empowerment. "Sometimes, it hits me, that this is really happening," Kemper-Hermann told me. "I have to remind myself that this is my life now."

Places like Ross County that have been hit by manufacturing declines are the leading edge of the future Rosin describes. Joblessness makes men less desirable partners, theorizes the MIT economist David Autor, who investigated why [marriage rates are declining](#) in areas that have seen high shares of manufacturing job losses. In addition, there are just fewer men now in these places, which include much of the Midwest. Autor's research shows that as men join the military, go to jail, or leave the area in search of work, women are outnumbering men. "The number of high-quality men whom you would want to marry is declining," Autor told me in February.

While some women aren't marrying, others are married to men who have little or no income, which means the women have to pick up the slack. When she was first married to her husband, Jesse, Angela Pryor, now 41, didn't work. Jesse had a good job as a carpenter and they agreed she'd stay home and raise their children. But as his addiction to heroin worsened, she had to increasingly contribute financially, and eventually went back to work at Walmart after he went to prison for selling drugs. "I had to work, I had to do it all, and I had to take care of him, which was harder than taking care of my kids," Pryor told me. Jesse died of an overdose in 2015, and Pryor has since lost her house. She is now raising five children alone.

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and I had to take care of him, which was harder than taking care of my kids.”

The opioid epidemic is one of the biggest contributors to the decline of men in places like Ohio. According to [data](#) compiled by the Kaiser Family Foundation, men accounted for two-thirds of all opioid overdose deaths in Ohio in 2015, and the share is similar in many states across the country. Teri Minney, whose group, the Heroin Partnership Project, visits homes after people have either died from or survived overdoses of heroin and opioids in Ross County, says 70 percent of the calls she gets are for men who have overdosed. To be sure, opioid deaths aren't only a men's problem—women have increasingly gotten addicted and moved into drugs like heroin, too. But in states like Ohio, deaths are much more concentrated among men.

And drug addiction isn't the only thing making men poor long-term partners. They're also just not working. There are likely many causes of this: poor wages, poor options, and, as I've [written before](#), health problems that keep people out of the workforce. Nationally, around 23 percent of men ages 23 to 54 are not working, while 31 percent of women are unemployed or out of the labor force, according to Shannon Monnat, a sociologist at Penn State. But in Scioto County, a particularly hard-hit part of southern Ohio, 42 percent of males aged 25 to 54 are unemployed or out of the labor market. “In these types of places, jobs and the dignity of work have been replaced by hopelessness, frustration, and sometimes, addiction,” she told me.

This pattern of men leaving the labor force is also happening nationwide. “There is no doubt that men are working much less during the 2000s, and it doesn't look like it's a cyclical pattern as much as it is structural,” said Erik Hurst, an economist at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business. His research suggests that men aged 21 to 30 without a college degree worked 12 percent less in 2015 than they did in 2000, and men aged 31 to 55 worked 8 percent less. Women's shares were lower: younger women worked 7 percent less, while older women worked four percent less. Much of this decline is not

just that all men worked fewer hours, but that a large number of men just stopped working, Hurst said, a trend that he attributed to automation and the disappearance of good jobs. The fraction of men who say they had worked zero hours over the past year has skyrocketed since 2000, he found. As they drop out of the labor force, men depend on family members and partners more, in some cases quite a lot. About 70 percent of non-working men ages 21 to 30 live with a parent or close relative other than a spouse, according to the Hurst data; 20 percent live with a spouse or with friends.

Women say that the decline of men is obvious in Chillicothe, this small town in Ross County, where I encountered men waiting outside a rehab clinic and standing in line at the unemployment office. "All the men here are either on drugs or unemployed," a bartender named Brittany told me, exaggerating a bit (she didn't want to give her last name). Two of her friends, fellow waitresses at the Chillicothe institution Jerry's Pizza, told me that they were raising their kids alone after one of their partners had gone to jail and the other had cheated. "It's very hard to find a good man here," Catherine Ratliff, 43, said. "We have to fend for ourselves." Ratliff, a trim blond with a long braid, told me she was trying to raise her children to be "strong and independent" and not depend on men for anything. "You just have to be single and strong," she said. Another Jerry's server, Pamela Moore, 41, moved to town recently from Florida, and said she had noticed the difference in the competency of men between the two locations. "They're all on dope or they're dying up here," she said.

I visited a rehab center in Piketon, Ohio, where men share tiny rooms with single beds and giant televisions while they try to break their addictions. Many, including Kevin Haywood, 49, say they know what their addiction has done to their wives. Unlike many men who are addicted to drugs, Haywood was able to hold down a job while he abused pills like Xanax, opioids, and cocaine. But while he made thousands of dollars a week in construction, he'd only come home with \$500 or so because he spent the rest on drugs. He wasn't a supportive partner during this time. He helped raise the kids, he said, but his wife had to do everything else. "She paid all the bills, she worked, she took care of stuff," he told me. Haywood says his wife isn't the only woman his addiction affected—his mother is in the hospital with heart problems he says were exacerbated by his past behavior. But it's his wife who kept his family running for the decades he was on drugs. Even now, he said, "I should be

taking care of my manly duties, but I'm up here trying to fix myself and my wife is down there dealing with the outside world, taking care of all the stuff that I should be doing."



A wall at the New Beginnings treatment center in Piketon, Ohio, lists the names of people who have died from drug overdoses. (Alana Semuels/ *The Atlantic*)

This rise of women and decline of men that I saw in Ohio is playing out among a largely white population. Everyone I met at the rehab facility and the other people I spoke to for this article was white. The African American community, where high rates of incarceration and low rates of employment among men have led to many women raising families by themselves, has faced similar challenges for a long time. In 2015, around [two-thirds](#) of black children were being raised in single-parent households, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, compared to one-fourth of white children. "Non-college white America looks very much like did black America did 20 or 30 years ago," Autor told me.

Indeed, the decline of men is not affecting all parts of the white community; highly educated workers, both men and women, are doing just fine economically. According to the [Economic Policy Institute](#), white men in the top 20 percent of income-earners are actually working 4 percent more than they did in 1979; men in the bottom two income quintiles are working fewer hours than they did in 1979. (Women in all income quintiles are working more.) These educated workers are [clustered in big cities](#), where good jobs are relatively abundant. In the areas where there are shrinking opportunities for people without a college education, men are dropping out of the workforce and women are left to carry them or live without them.

April Diamanka, 32, who is white, is raising her three-year-old daughter alone. Her daughter's father is an alcoholic, she told me, and he lives in a different city and doesn't contribute to the family. Diamanka told me that her two best friends are also raising children alone in Chillicothe—one woman's husband got deported, the other woman's husband is in jail. "Money-wise, it's hard to do it on your own," she told me. Finding a new partner isn't possible, she said, at least in Chillicothe. "A lot of people here are on drugs and I don't want that in my life," she said.

But even for the women who make enough to support their families, living without a partner can be a nightmare. Kemper-Hermann says she never expected that her husband, Jason, would die of a heroin overdose. He would have periods during which he was sober—Kemper-Hermann refused to marry him until he had been sober for a year. But then he'd relapse, and disappear for days on end, losing his job and blowing their money. She kept working, because she knew his income wasn't reliable. "It was always in the back of my mind—I have to make sure things are okay and I can pay the bills, because I don't know if he's going to bring his next paycheck home or go somewhere with it," she told me.

Her husband used to joke that he lived like a rock star, Kemper-Hermann told me, which meant she was constantly worrying about him getting into trouble—she would watch news reports about bank robberies and hope the culprit wasn't her husband. "One of the hardest things was not having the emotional support—not knowing what I was coming home to," she told me.

Jason was three months sober when he died. The couple had just had entered into a contract on a new house, but Kemper-Hermann had to pull out of the deal because she couldn't afford it on her income alone. She and her daughter instead moved in with her parents.

Now, the two live on their own, but Kemper-Hermann's daughter is about to graduate high school and move to Columbus. Kemper-Hermann is trying to find a new life, using her grief to get more involved in prevention efforts. She started a local chapter of a group, Grief Recovery After a Substance Passing, for people who have lost a loved one to overdoses, and counsels other people who have lost someone. It doesn't, she says, make it any easier to know that she's not the only woman who has found herself alone.

This post originally appeared on [The Atlantic](#).

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