

Bringing the Breadwinner Back In: Relative Wages and Diseases of Despair

The United States has recently witnessed a dramatic uptick in the morbidity of its White, working-class citizens. Economists have explained much of this uptick by noting the recent rise in “diseases of despair,” such as alcoholism, within this population. However, they have often failed to explain why these diseases are much more prevalent among men than among women. In this paper, I advance a novel explanation for the recent increase in morbidity among White, working-class U.S. men. Drawing on research that indicates that heterosexual couples exhibit a strong aversion to situations in which wives out-earn their husbands, I ask whether economic conditions that have led many men to lose their status as primary breadwinner have contributed to their declining health. Examining the impact of changes in men’s breadwinner status on changes in their health outcomes, I observe that men who lose breadwinner status are 1.5 times more likely to report declines in health. However, men who are not breadwinners are also less likely to become obese and more likely to stop binge drinking. Changes in relative incomes within couples may indeed assist in explaining morbidity among men, though the direction of effects may be unexpected.