

[Working Papers](#)

# The Declining Economic Position of Less-Skilled American Males

---

McKinley L. Blackburn, David E. Bloom & Richard B. Freeman

SHARE       

---

WORKING PAPER 3186

DOI 10.3386/w3186

ISSUE DATE November 1989

---

This paper documents the substantial decline in the economic position of less-skilled American males that has occurred since the early 1970's. The paper also explores a variety of potential explanations for the widening of earnings differentials between more- and less-educated white males. On the basis of these analyses, we draw four main conclusions.

First, our analyses indicate that industrial shift and deunionization account for non-negligible portions of the overall increase in educational wage differentials that occurred in the 1980's. Among 25-64 year olds, these effects are offset by changes in the relative supply of college graduates, which acted to reduce differentials. Among 25-34 year olds,

in contrast, changes in relative supply add to our ability to explain the widening of wage gaps. As a result, we are modestly successful in explaining the growth of wage differentials between educational groups in the 1980's for males aged 25-34, but are

differentials between educational groups in the 1980's for males aged 25-34, but are largely unsuccessful in explaining the growth in wage differentials for males aged 25-64.

Second, our analysis achieves greater success when we focus our aim on explaining the change in the growth rate of wage differentials between the 1970's and 1980's. Here we find that relative supply movements, which differed sharply between the 1970's and 1980's, can by themselves account for much of the accelerated pace of change in the wage gaps. This factor operates similarly for 25-64 and 25-34 year olds, since the relative supply of college graduates in both age groups decelerated from the 1970's to the 1980's.

Third, our analysis suggests that the 1970's and 1980's differed importantly in ways not captured by our analyses. Since we are able to measure labor supply and institutional changes reasonably well, we can infer that outward shifts in the relative demand for college graduates, caused by factors we were unable to measure, accelerated in the 1980's.

Fourth, we find little evidence that the recent widening of wage gaps across educational groups is due to (1) the 1980's decline in the real value of the minimum wage, (2) the increased pace of technological change, (3) changes in the labor supply of white males below age 25 and of women in different educational groups, or (4) changes over time in the quality of less-educated workers.

MUST BE ORDERED FROM THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION.

Publications Department Brookings Institution

1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20036

(202) 797-6000

## Acknowledgements and Disclosures

---

## Download Citation

---

# Related

PROGRAMS

Labor Studies

## More from the NBER

---

In addition to [working papers](#), the NBER disseminates affiliates' latest findings through a range of free periodicals — the [NBER Reporter](#), the [NBER Digest](#), the [Bulletin on Health](#), and the [Bulletin on Entrepreneurship](#) — as well as online [conference reports](#), [video lectures](#), and [interviews](#).



Martin Feldstein Lecture, Summer Institute 2025

### **The Fiscal Future**

N. Gregory Mankiw, Harvard University and NBER  
July 10, 2025

#### **2025, 17th Annual Feldstein Lecture, N. Gregory Mankiw, "The Fiscal Future"**

FELDSTEIN LECTURE

PRESENTER: [N. GREGORY MANKIW](#)

N. Gregory Mankiw, Robert M. Beren Professor of Economics at Harvard University, presented the 2025 Martin Feldstein...



Methods Lecture, Summer Institute 2025  
**Uncovering Causal Mechanisms:  
Mediation Analysis and  
Surrogate Indices**



Raj Chetty, Harvard University and NBER  
Kosuke Imai, Harvard University  
July 24, 2025

**2025, Methods Lecture, Raj Chetty and Kosuke Imai, "Uncovering Causal Mechanisms:  
Mediation Analysis and Surrogate Indices"**

METHODS LECTURES

PRESENTERS: [RAJ CHETTY](#) & [KOSUKE IMAI](#)

SlidesBackground materials on mediationImai, Kosuke, Dustin Tingley, and Teppei Yamamoto. (2013). "Experimental Designs..."



International Trade and Macroeconomics, Summer Institute 2025

**Panel on The Future of the Global Economy**

Oleg Itskhoki, Harvard University and NBER  
Paul Krugman, City University of New York and NBER  
Linda Tesar, University of Michigan and NBER  
July 8, 2025

**2025 International Trade and Macroeconomics, "Panel on The Future of the Global Economy"**

PRESENTERS: [OLEG ITSKHOKI](#), [PAUL R. KRUGMAN](#) & [LINDA TESAR](#)

Supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation grant #G-2023-19633, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation grant #20251294...

## **National Bureau of Economic Research**

### Contact Us

1050 Massachusetts Avenue  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
617-868-3900  
[info@nber.org](mailto:info@nber.org)  
[webaccessibility@nber.org](mailto:webaccessibility@nber.org)

### HOMEPAGE

### [Accessibility Policy](#)

### [Diversity Policy](#)

### [Privacy Policy](#)

### FOLLOW

