Making Jobs Good

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Executive Summary

A series of earlier CEPR reports documented a substantial decline over the last three decades in the share of "good jobs" in the U.S. economy. This fall-off in job quality took place despite a large increase in the educational attainment and age of the workforce, as well as the productivity of the average U.S. worker.

This report evaluates the likely impact of several policies that seek to address job quality, including universal health insurance, a universal retirement system (over and above Social Security), a large increase in college attainment, a large increase in unionization, and gender pay equity.

We draw five main conclusions:

First, reconnecting job quality to economic growth will likely require big steps. The policies simulated in this paper would all qualify as major policy initiatives, yet none would create a sufficient number of good jobs to employ even half of the U.S. workforce.

Second, eliminating bad jobs appears to be easier than creating good jobs. Most of the proposals examined – especially universal programs such as universal health care or a universal retirement plan – do more to reduce the share of bad jobs than they do to increase the share of good jobs. (Our classification system divides jobs into three categories: good jobs, bad jobs, and jobs that fall in between.)

Third, a combination of complementary policies appears to be significantly more effective than if any one of the policies is enacted on its own. Separate implementation of a universal retirement plan or health insurance would both greatly boost the share of workers in good jobs, but the simultaneous implementation of both policies would raise the good-jobs share by more than the sum of the two distinct policies.

Fourth, gender pay equity would go a substantial way towards eliminating the large good-jobs gap between men and women. By our calculations, a policy of pay equity for women and men with the same educational qualifications would reduce the gender good-jobs gap by about 90 percent.

Finally, increasing unionization appears to be substantially more effective than a comparable expansion of college attainment. Given that increasing college attainment is a long and expensive process, these findings suggest the importance of emphasizing unionization as much or more than college attainment as a key path to improving job quality.

Introduction

In a series of earlier reports, we documented a substantial decline over the last three decades in the share of "good jobs" in the U.S. economy.[1] This fall-off in job quality took place despite a large increase in the educational attainment and age of the workforce, as well as the productivity of the average U.S. worker.[2]

This report turns to possible solutions by evaluating the likely impact of several policies that seek to address job quality, including: universal health insurance, a universal retirement system (over and above Social Security), a large increase in college attainment, a large increase in unionization, and gender pay equity.

The policy simulations demonstrate that none of these policies are a panacea. But, the simulations also show that each of these policies would go at least some way toward reconnecting overall economic growth to job quality.

The rest of the report presents definitions of "good" and "bad" jobs, describes the data used to measure job quality, analyzes the good and bad job trends in the U.S. economy since 1979 (the earliest year for which consistent data are available), and simulates the effects that the different policy proposals would have had on the share of good and bad jobs in 2011 (the most recent available data).

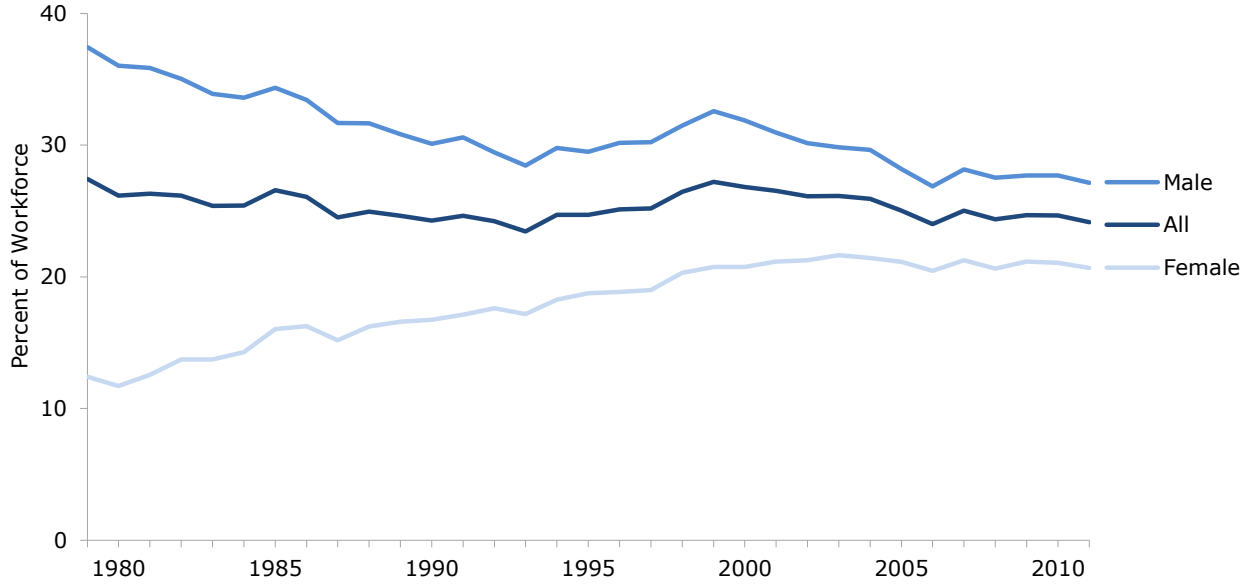
Data and Definitions

Following earlier CEPR work on job quality, we define a good job as one that (1) pays at least $19 per hour (in constant 2011 dollars) *and* (2) has employer-provided health insurance *and* (3) has some kind of retirement plan (either a traditional pension or a 401(k)-style plan). **Figure 1** displays the share of good jobs using this definition, by gender, from 1979 through 2011. For all workers, the share in good jobs fell from 27.4 percent in 1979 to 24.1 percent in 2011. Over the same period, for men, the good-jobs share dropped 10.3 percentage points to 27.1 percent. For women, however, the share in good jobs increased 8.3 percentage points by 2011 to 20.7 percent.

We define a bad job as one that meets *none* of these three criteria, that is, (1) pays less than $19 per hour *and* (2) has no employer-provided health insurance *and* (3) has no retirement plan of any kind. **Figure 2** shows the corresponding trends for bad jobs by gender. The share of workers in bad jobs increased overall (from 17.7 percent in 1979, to 23.8 percent in 2011) and for men (from 12.8 percent in 1979, to 21.7 percent in 2011). The share of women in bad jobs changed little over the period, rising 1.0 percentage points between 1979 and 2011.

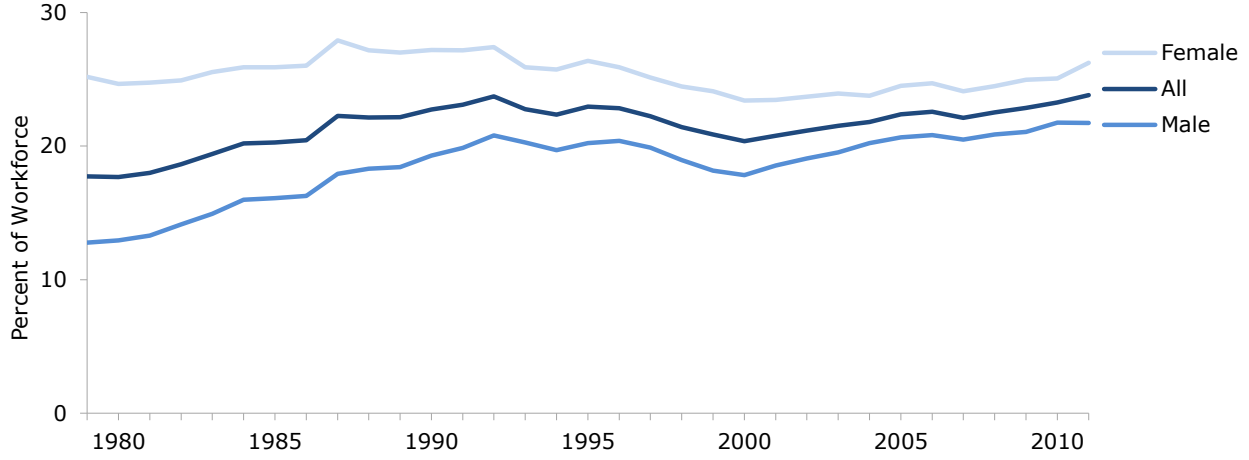
1 See Schmitt (2005, 2007, 2008) and Schmitt and Jones (2012a, 2012b).
2 See Mishel, Bivens, Gould, and Shierholz (2012) and Baker (2007) and Baker and Rosnick (2007).

FIGURE 1
Share of Good Jobs, 1979-2011



Source: Authors' analysis of March Current Population Survey.

FIGURE 2
Share of Bad Jobs, 1979-2011



Source: Authors' analysis of March Current Population Survey.

Note that some jobs fall in between our good job and bad job definitions. These jobs have at least one of the characteristics of a good job, but not all three.

The most significant constraint operating on our definition of good and bad jobs was the desire to use criteria that could be measured on a consistent basis from the end of the 1970s through the present. The definitions we ultimately selected ignore many important aspects of job quality, including paid vacation and sick days, scheduling flexibility, opportunities for advancement, health

and safety, and many other issues.[3] But, these definitions have the advantage that they are simple, intuitive, and compatible with government data available on an annual basis since 1979.

To estimate long-term trends in job quality and to conduct the policy simulations, we use the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is a monthly survey of about 60,000 U.S. households, conducted by the Census Bureau. It is nationally representative and best known as the source of the official monthly unemployment numbers. The CPS gathers detailed information about the labor-market activity of adults, which we use to assess job quality and relate it to other worker characteristics also collected in the CPS.

The CPS allows us to calculate an hourly wage (based on annual earnings from work, the number of weeks worked in the year, and the usual hours worked per week). By our definition, a good job must pay at least $19 per hour in 2011 dollars, a figure selected because it was the median hourly wage of a male worker in 1979.

The CPS asks workers if they had employer-provided health insurance. By our definition, workers can only be in a good job if they have employer-provided health insurance through their own employer.[4]

The CPS also asks whether workers had an employer-sponsored retirement plan and whether they participated in the plan. By our definition, a worker can only be in a good job if his or her employer provides, and he or she participates in, some kind of retirement plan. Plans may be traditional, defined-benefit pensions or (usually) less generous defined-contribution systems along the lines of 401(k) plans.[5]

The sample of workers analyzed is limited to individuals with reasonably strong attachments to work. All workers in the sample worked at least 26 weeks in the year and worked an average of at least 20 hours per week.

Five Policies

We evaluate the impact of five separate policies designed to directly or indirectly improve job quality: (1) a universal health-insurance system, (2) a universal retirement plan over and above Social Security, (3) a 25 percent increase in the share of the workforce with a college degree, (4) an identically sized increase (expressed as a share of the total workforce) in the unionized workforce, and (5) gender pay equity for workers with the same level of education. The primary concern is not with the specific form taken in the implementation of these policy goals, but rather with the likely impact of successfully implemented versions of each of these proposals.

3 Pay, health insurance, and retirement plans are important on their own terms, but they are also strongly correlated with other desirable job characteristics, which, due to data limitations, we are not able to include here.

4 For a discussion of several limitations of the CPS health-insurance variables in the present context, see Schmitt and Jones (2012a, 2012b). For a detailed discussion of changes to the CPS health-insurance questions, see Rho and Schmitt (2010).

5 For a discussion of several limitations of the CPS retirement-plan variables, see Schmitt and Jones (2012a, 2012b).

For each policy, we simulate the impact on the total share of good (and bad) jobs in the economy in 2011 as well as on the three separate components of the good and bad jobs definition. Universal health insurance, for example, will act through the health-insurance criterion, not the pension or earnings criteria; college completion or unions, however, will have an effect on all three criteria. The simulations look first at the workforce as a whole and then separately at the impact on women and men.

Universal health care

The first simulation analyzes the impact of a system of universal health insurance. In 2011, 43.7 percent of U.S. workers did not have employer-provided health insurance through their own employer.[6] **Table 1** (row two) shows the results of a simple simulation that assumes that all workers had health insurance. Specifically, we assume that: (1) 100.0 percent of workers had health insurance, compared to an actual rate of employer-provided health insurance of 56.3 percent (see the first row of the same table, which presents the actual data for 2011); and (2) that the share of workers with a retirement plan (45.1 percent) and meeting the earnings cutoff (47.3 percent) were identical to the actual figure in 2011.[7] Under these assumptions, universal health insurance would raise the share of good jobs from its actual rate of 24.1 percent to 28.8 percent.[8]

TABLE 1
Good Jobs, Components of Good Jobs, and Bad Jobs, Attached Workers, 2011

	Good Jobs	Earnings Cutoff	Retirement Plan	Health Insurance	Bad Jobs
Actual	24.1	47.3	45.1	56.3	23.8
Universal Healthcare	28.8	47.3	45.1	100.0	0.0
Universal Retirement Plan	33.7	47.3	100.0	56.3	0.0
Universal Healthcare and Retirement Plan	45.0	47.3	100.0	100.0	0.0
Increase in College Attainment	26.9	51.2	48.6	57.9	21.1
Increase in Unionization Rate	30.8	51.2	54.6	64.6	20.1
Gender Pay Equity	26.7	53.6	45.1	56.3	22.4

Source: Authors' analysis of March Current Population Survey.

The impact on the share of bad jobs is much larger. By our definition, a job must fail all three of the criteria to be classified as a bad job. In 2011, 23.8 percent of jobs had earnings below the cutoff *and* lacked a retirement plan *and* lacked employer-provided health insurance. By ensuring that all workers have health insurance, a universal health-insurance policy would eliminate all "bad jobs" by our definition.

Universal retirement plan

Table 1 (row three) simulates the effects on job quality of a universal retirement plan along the lines of Dean Baker's (2006) "Universal Voluntary Accounts" or Teresa Ghilarducci's (2007) "Guaranteed

6 In 2008, 17.7 percent of workers had no health insurance through any source, see Rho and Schmitt (2010).
7 Effectively, we are assuming that the increase in health insurance coverage does not come at the expense of cuts in pay or retirement benefits.
8 In practice, we use the actual March 2012 CPS microdata, but all observations are assigned the value of one for the zero-one variable for employer-provided health insurance.

Retirement Accounts." Baker's plan would create a completely portable, voluntary, privately managed defined-contribution retirement system regulated and administered at the state level. Ghilarducci's proposal "calls for all workers not enrolled in an equivalent or better defined-benefit pension to enroll in a Guaranteed Retirement Account," which combines features of defined-benefit and defined-contribution plans.

Paralleling the health-insurance simulation, we assume that 100.0 percent of workers would now meet the retirement-plan requirement, with no changes to the share meeting the earnings cutoff or the health-insurance criteria. Under these assumptions, the share of workers with good jobs would increase from 24.1 percent (the actual share in 2011) to 33.7 percent. The effect here is larger than in the case of health insurance because fewer workers have employer-provided retirement plans (45.1 percent) than employer-provided health insurance (56.3 percent). As with universal health insurance, a universal retirement-plan system would – by definition – entirely eliminate bad jobs.

Universal health insurance *and* universal retirement plan

The fourth row of Table 1 presents the results of a simulation that assumes that universal health insurance *and* retirement plans are implemented simultaneously. The two policies together would raise the share of good jobs to 45.0 percent, almost doubling the actual rate in 2011 (24.1 percent).

Increase in college attainment

About one-third of the U.S. workforce has a four-year college degree or more. Many proposals to reduce inequality and increase job quality focus on raising the share of workers with college degrees.[9] Table 1 (row five) shows the results of a simulation where the share of college graduates is increased by 25 percent, from 34.9 percent (the actual rate in the 2011 workforce) to 43.6 percent of all workers.[10]

A 25 percent increase in the college-graduate share has an effect on all three components of the good jobs index. The rise in college workers increases the share of workers that make the earnings cut-off (up 3.9 percentage points, to 51.2 percent), have employer-provided retirement plans (up 3.5 percentage points, to 48.6 percent), and have employer-provided health insurance (up 1.6 percentage points, to 57.9 percent). Together, these improvements in the individual measures combine to increase the share of workers in good jobs by 2.8 percentage points (from 24.1 percent, to 26.9 percent). The expansion of college attainment also cuts the share of workers in bad jobs by about the same amount (down 2.7 percentage points, to 21.1 percent).

Increase in unionization rate

Another possible cause of the deterioration in job quality is the decline in unionization rates since the 1950s, and especially since the late 1970s. Table 1 (row six) presents estimates of the impact on job quality of an expansion in the U.S. unionization rate to roughly where it was in the 1970s. To facilitate comparisons, the size of the increase in unionization in this simulation – 8.7 percentage

9 For a comprehensive discussion of the connection between college attainment and inequality, see Goldin and Katz (2010). For a critique of the idea that a deceleration in college attainment rates is responsible for rising inequality, see Mishel, Bernstein, and Shierholz (2009) and Schmitt (2010).

10 We do this by increasing the CPS weights of college-educated workers and decreasing the corresponding weights of non-college-educated workers.

points (from 13.8 percent, to 22.5 percent) is identical to the increase in the share of workers with college degrees in the preceding simulation (which corresponded to a 25 percent increase in the share of workers with college degree).[11]

The increase in the unionization rate has the biggest impact on the share of workers with retirement plans (up 9.5 percentage points, to 54.6 percent) and health insurance (up 8.3 percentage points, to 64.6 percent). Unionization also increases the share of workers meeting the earnings cutoff (up 3.9 percentage points, to 51.2 percent). The combined effect is to increase the share of workers with good jobs by 6.7 percentage points, to 30.8 percent. At the same time, the share of workers in bad jobs falls 3.7 percentage points, to 20.1 percent.

Gender pay equity

As noted earlier, men are substantially more likely than women to have good jobs. The most important reason for this gap is the much lower share of women (40.2 percent) than men (53.5 percent) who meet the minimum earnings cutoff. The gender difference for health insurance is smaller (58.0 percent of men, versus 54.3 percent of women), and women (45.7 percent) are actually slightly more likely than men (44.7 percent) to have retirement plans.

The final policy analyzed is gender pay equity.[12] This simulation assumes that women and men with the same level of education (less than high school, high school, some college, college or more) receive the same pay – an equalization we simulate by raising the pay of women and maintaining the pay of men unchanged.[13] The last column of Table 1 gives the results of this final simulation. Gender pay equity – which is simulated by assigning women the same wage as men at the same point in the male wage distribution – increases the share of the total workforce that meets the earnings cutoff by 6.3 percentage points (from 47.3 percent, to 53.6 percent).[14] This rise in the share of the workforce making at least the earnings cutoff increases the share of workers with good jobs by 2.6 percentage points, to 26.7 percent of all workers. Gender pay equity also reduces the share of workers in bad jobs by 1.4 percentage points, to 22.4 percent.

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11 We employ the same procedure used for college graduates: the CPS weights of the unionized workers are increased and the CPS weights for non-unionized workers are decreased to produce a new workforce with a unionization rate 8.7 percentage higher than in the actual 2011 workforce. The union variable in the March CPS is drawn from the CPS Outgoing Rotation Group; union status refers to the worker's job as of March of the current year, not the worker's job in the preceding calendar year, and is available for only one-fourth of the total sample. Note that our procedure (here and elsewhere) does not factor in general equilibrium effects. We have, for example, not factored in possible price impacts associated with higher union compensation rates nor have we attempted to model possible spillovers of union wage and compensation practices on non-union workers (Western and Rosenfeld, 2011).

12 As with the other policies, the concern here is to produce a reasonable estimate of the likely impact of a successfully implemented version of the policies proposed. The specifics in this case are assumed to involve some combination of anti-discrimination legislation and enforcement, public education, and other measures.

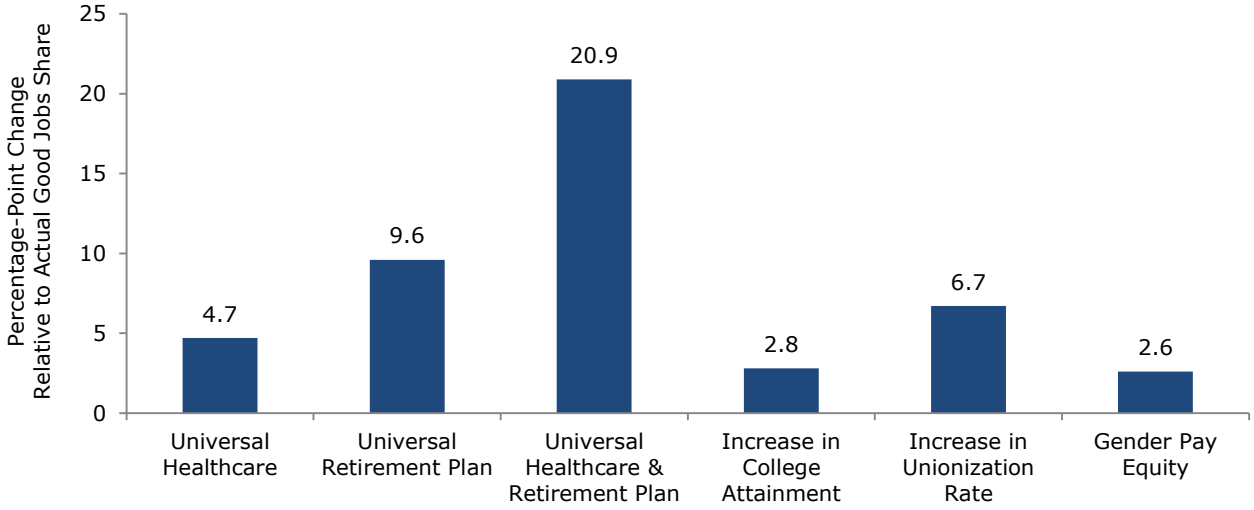
13 For each of the four education groups separately, men are first ordered from the least to the best paid, then each of the four education groups are divided into 25 equally sized groups. We next calculate the average pay within each of these 25 groups within each of the education categories, and then assign this average to all women in the corresponding education-earnings groups in the women's earnings distribution.

14 In this model, pay equity leaves other forms of compensation unchanged. One quick way to model full gender "compensation equity" would be to note that if women had the same pay and probability of having retirement and health plans as men, then women would have an overall "good jobs" rate essentially identical to that of men. This is roughly true because in 2011, women and men in the workforce had roughly similar levels of education.

Comparing policies

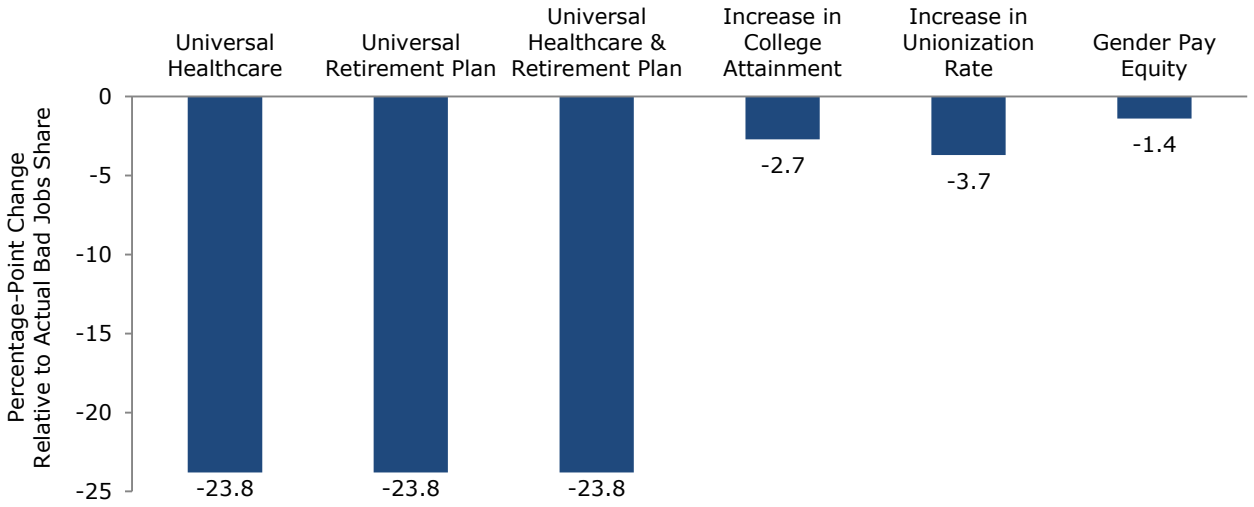
The impact on the volume of good and bad jobs varies substantially across policies. Focusing first on good jobs (see **Figure 3**), by far the most effective policy is the combination of universal health care and a universal retirement plan. Together, these policies increase the share of good jobs by 20.9 percentage points. The universal retirement plan has, on its own, a larger impact (raising good jobs by 9.6 percentage points) than universal health care (which increases the good-jobs share by 4.7 percentage points). Increasing the unionization rate by 8.7 percentage points would raise the share of good jobs by 6.7 percentage points, more than twice the impact of an identical increase in the share of workers with college degrees (2.6 percentage points). Gender pay equity has the smallest estimated impact (increasing good jobs 2.6 percentage points), but as shown later, the impact on women is, not surprisingly, substantially larger.

FIGURE 3
Simulated Effect of Policy Changes, Good Jobs, 2011



Source: Authors' analysis of March Current Population Survey.

FIGURE 4
Simulated Effect of Policy Changes, Bad Jobs, 2011



Source: Authors' analysis of March Current Population Survey.

The impact on bad jobs (see **Figure 4**) also varies widely across the policy options. By definition, a bad job meets none of the three criteria. As a result, policies that provide universal health insurance or a universal retirement plan eliminate all "bad" jobs. Using the data for 2011, universal health insurance, universal retirement, or a combination of the two would all cut the bad jobs rate by 23.8 percentage points, to zero. Of the remaining policies, increasing unionization has the largest effect, cutting bad jobs by 3.7 percentage points. An increase in college attainment (equal to the increase in unionization) is the next most effective policy, reducing bad jobs by 2.7 percentage points. Pay equity would have the least effect on bad jobs, yielding a 1.4 percentage-point drop in bad jobs.

Results by gender

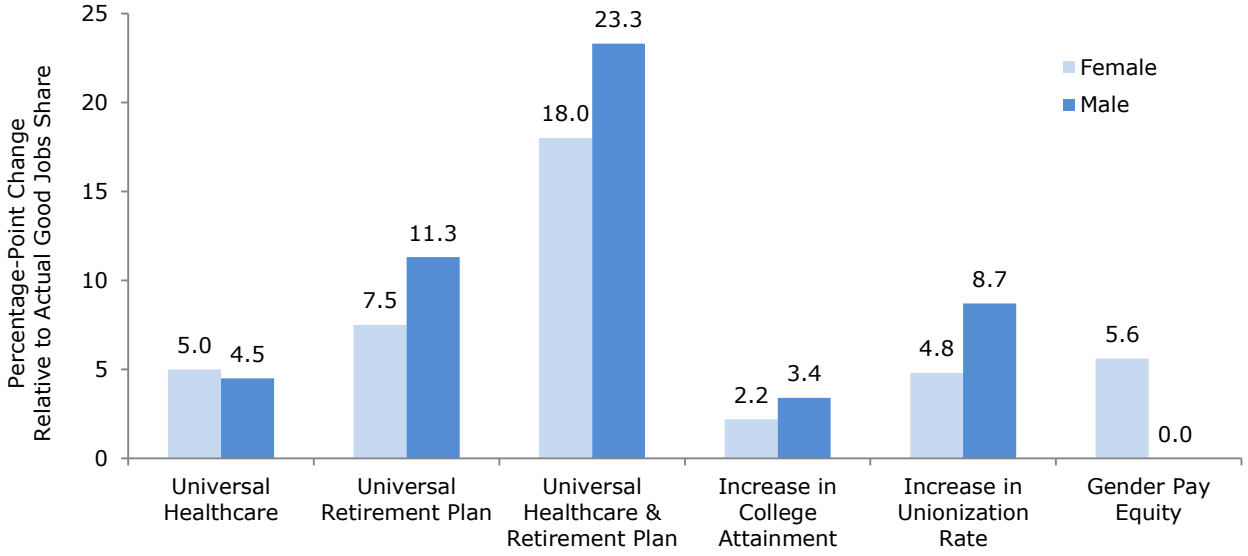
Table 2 provides gender breakdowns for the same policy simulations. The first row in panel (a), for women, and panel (b), for men, shows the actual 2011 share of workers in good jobs, in bad jobs, and meeting each of the three separate job-quality standards (earnings, retirement, and health). In 2011, women were much less likely than men to be in good jobs (20.7 percent of women, compared to 27.1 percent of men). Women were also less likely to meet the earnings cutoff (40.2 percent of women, compared to 53.5 percent of men) or to have health insurance (54.3 percent of women, compared to 58.0 percent of men). Women were, however, slightly more likely than men to have retirement plans through their current employer (45.7 percent, compared to 44.7 percent of men). Finally, a higher share of women (26.2 percent) were in bad jobs (those failing to meet all three criteria) than men (21.7 percent).

TABLE 2
Good Jobs, Components of Good Jobs, and Bad Jobs, By Gender, 2011

	Good Jobs	Earnings Cutoff	Retirement Plan	Health Insurance	Bad Jobs
(a) Female					
Actual	20.7	40.2	45.7	54.3	26.2
Universal Healthcare	25.7	40.2	45.7	100.0	0.0
Universal Retirement Plan	28.2	40.2	100.0	50.7	0.0
Universal Healthcare and Retirement Plan	38.7	40.2	100.0	100.0	0.0
Increase in College Attainment	22.9	43.7	48.7	55.3	23.7
Increase in Unionization Rate	25.5	43.5	53.5	60.8	22.9
Gender Pay Equity	26.3	53.8	45.7	54.3	23.2
(b) Male					
Actual	27.1	53.5	44.7	58.0	21.7
Universal Healthcare	31.6	53.5	44.7	100.0	0.0
Universal Retirement Plan	38.4	53.5	100.0	58.0	0.0
Universal Healthcare and Retirement Plan	50.4	53.5	100.0	100.0	0.0
Increase in College Attainment	30.5	57.9	48.5	60.3	18.8
Increase in Unionization Rate	35.8	58.5	55.7	68.2	17.5
Gender Pay Equity	27.1	53.5	44.7	58.0	21.7

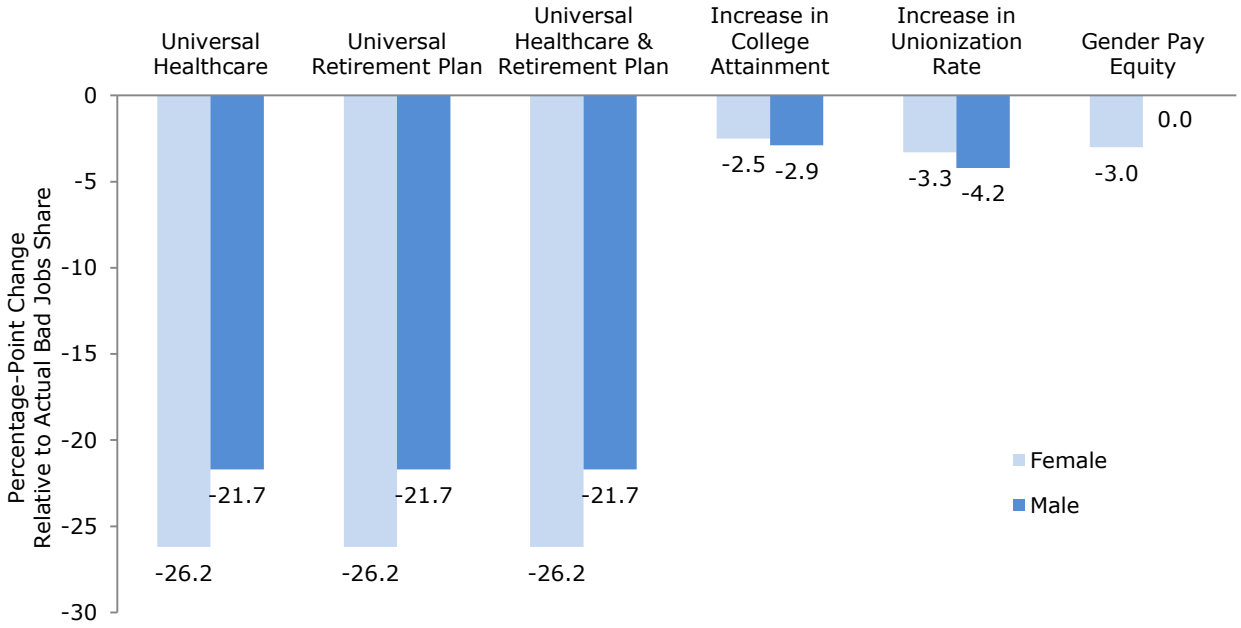
Source: Authors' analysis of March Current Population Survey.

FIGURE 5
Simulated Effect of Policy Changes, Good Jobs, By Gender, 2011



Source: Authors' analysis of March Current Population Survey.

FIGURE 6
Simulated Effect of Policy Changes, Bad Jobs, By Gender, 2011



Source: Authors' analysis of March Current Population Survey.

With the exception of gender pay equity, the order of policy impacts is identical for women and men (see **Figures 5** and **6**). The policy that has, by far, the biggest impact on job quality is a combination of a universal retirement plan and universal health insurance, which increases the share of women in good jobs by 18.0 percentage points and men by 23.3 percentage points. On its own, universal retirement is the more important of the two policies, raising the good-jobs share for men (up 11.3 percentage points) and for women (up 7.5 percentage points). Universal health insurance, on its own, has a somewhat smaller impact on both women (up 5.0 percentage points) and men (up 4.5

percentage points). Increasing unionization is more important than a comparable boost in college completion. For women, unionization boosts the share in good jobs 4.8 percentage-points, more than double the 2.2 percentage-point effect of a similar increase in college attainment. For men, a comparable rise in unionization increases the share in good jobs by 8.7 percentage points, compared to only 3.4 percentage points for expanding college attainment.

Given that the most important reason that women trail behind men in the good-jobs index is that they are substantially less likely than men to meet the earnings cutoff, it is not surprising that pay equity goes a long way towards closing the gender gap in good jobs. In 2011, women were 6.4 percentage points less likely than men to be in good jobs. When we simulate pay equity between men and women, the gender gap in good jobs falls to just 0.8 percentage points. These calculations suggest that gender pay equity would eliminate almost 90 percent of the good-jobs gap between women and men.

Conclusion

The series of policy simulations carried out in this paper offer several lessons:

First, reconnecting job quality to economic growth will likely require big steps. The large-scale increase over the last three decades in the educational attainment and work experience of the labor force has not been sufficient to prevent a decline in the share of workers in good jobs or an increase in the share of workers in bad jobs. The policies simulated in this paper would all qualify as major policy initiatives, yet none would create a sufficient number of good jobs to employ even half of the U.S. workforce.

Second, eliminating bad jobs appears to be easier than creating good jobs. This is, in part, a function of the specific criteria used, which are based on three simple standards for pay, health insurance, and a retirement plan. But, policies such as universal health care or a universal retirement plan do more to reduce the share of bad jobs than they do to increase the share of good jobs.

Third, a combination of complementary policies looks to be more effective than independently enacting individual policies. Separate implementation of a universal retirement plan or health insurance would both greatly boost the share of workers in good jobs, but the simultaneous implementation of both policies would raise the good job share by more than the sum of the two distinct policies.

Fourth, gender pay equity would go a substantial way towards eliminating the large good-jobs gap between men and women. By our calculations, a policy of pay equity for women and men with the same educational qualifications would reduce the gender good-jobs gap by almost 90 percent.

Finally, increasing unionization appears to be substantially more effective than a comparable expansion of college attainment. For all workers, and separately for men and women, increases in unionization consistently raise the share of good jobs more than similar-sized increases in college education. Given that increasing college attainment is a long and expensive process, and one that is likely to be much less effective for older workers, these findings suggest the importance of emphasizing unionization as much or more than college attainment as a key path to improving job quality.

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