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CHRIS TOMLINSON  
Commentary



## Here are the faces of labor dropouts

Americans are learning to look past the headline unemployment rate to see how many people have stopped looking for jobs as a sign of our nation's economic health.

But who are the people dropping out and why have they given up?

That's an important question for President Donald Trump's administration. The labor participation rate is one of the key gauges of success for his presidency.

The dropouts are exactly who you would expect: men without a post-high school education, minorities and veterans, according to researchers at the think tank Brookings.

About 98 percent of men 25 to 54 were in the labor market in 1954. That number has dropped to 88 percent.

About 94 percent of men who had only a high school diploma were in the workforce in 1968, and so were 93 percent of dropouts. Since then, 83 percent of those with only a high school diploma are still working, and the participation rate for dropouts is 78 percent.

Employers say they don't need as much unskilled labor. This is not so much a case of people dropping out of the workforce, as low-skilled workers getting sidelined. If policymakers want to boost the economy, they need to ensure young people get a good education.

The problems facing African-Americans is three-fold. First, old-fashioned racism, where even today, too many employers will hire an unqualified Anglo before they will hire a qualified African-American, according to studies.

The second is segregated schools, where blacks still don't get an equal education to those attending majority-white schools.

Lastly, blacks also experience a far higher felony conviction and incarceration rate than any other racial group. Again, studies prove that blacks are treated differently.

As a veteran, I can't say I'm surprised that my cohort suffers from a low participation rate. A highly qualified veteran can become frustrated to have an employer dismiss their experiences in favor of someone with a more traditional education. And sometimes our pride can get in the way of accepting entry-level assignments.

Employers and policymakers can do many things to address these problems. Support local schools, start apprenticeship programs and institute hiring protocols that are race neutral, and accept experience in lieu of education.

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# On the Astrodome ...

## What happens if we use it for the world's biggest light show?

By Molly Glentzer

What if the Astrodome roof held the world's biggest media installation?

Think of it: The exquisite circular geometry of that 5-acre pie of more than 4,000 translucent skylights could hold an ever-changing, eye-popping kaleidoscope — an attraction that would dwarf even the cool experience of the Buffalo Bayou Cistern, creating starry, starry nights that could only happen in a Houston universe.

That's the idea behind the "Star Dome," a proposal by Rice University alums who are too young to remember the Astrodome when the Astros still played there. Joshua Jest and Alex Weinheimer arrived in 2009 but were mesmerized by the geometry of the roof when they saw a view of it at night, taken from a blimp.

They shared their 3-D printed model of the "Star Dome" Thursday during a presentation by the Astrodome Conservancy.

Founded last summer by Phoebe Tudor, Judy Nyquist and Minnette Boesel, the conservancy is partnering with Harris County to help make the iconic structure the new hub of NRG Park. For starters, the group has hired HR&A Advisors, a nationally known real estate development and public policy consulting firm, to develop a business plan and suggestions for "short-term activations" that could happen before Harris County begins its \$105 million renovation to raise the Dome's floor to street level and create a two-floor, 1,400-space parking lot underneath.

HR&A partner Cary Hirschstein brought a slide show suggesting the range of possibilities for a "temporary activation strategy."

"You want to redefine the experience of the Astrodome — get Houstonians to reimagine what this place could be. Secondly, we want to inspire them, so they're really understand the potential of this place," he said. "And lastly, it's an incredible opportunity to experiment and see what resonates well in advance of the actual capital work to fit out a future civic space .... We want to make sure we're not missing an opportunity. Construction is going to start in about 12-18 months. Rather than waiting and planning, why don't we get in there today?"

Offering a look at options for consideration, not proposing specific



projects, he showed slides of several spectacular, selfie-worthy, art-based "activations" in other cities — including the "Mirror Maze" at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, a "beach" inserted into the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. and artist Douglas Gordon's recent "tears become... streams become," a spectacularly reflective music and water installation for New York's Park Avenue Armory.

But art-based activations could also be as affordable as Rufus Wainwright's collaboration with a group of 1,500 amateur singers for Toronto's Luminato Festival, which featured an epic group performance of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" at the repurposed Hearn Generating Station.

The Dome could also immediately accommodate festivals and concerts — or even community athletic events, Hirschstein said.

The crowd buzzed; all these ideas seemed feasible.

Then Tudor handed the mic to Weinheimer and Jest, and faces lit up.

"No matter what's going on inside, you could do something with the roof with lighting to complement it," Weinheimer said. "The lit area is 5 acres. That would make it the biggest screen in the world — unprecedented, and in the spirit of the Astrodome in general." It would make the Dome, once again, unlike any other venue in the world.

The "Star Dome" might require 125 or more projectors, Jest said, "but it's not that difficult technically."

The point, he said, would be to instill something new and unique that stays true to the Dome but reinvents it. A dazzling light show could be one aspect of it. But his massive projection system could also project movies: "A giant drive-in!," he said. "Artistically, it's a wild platform for anything you could want."

Tudor said creating the "Star Dome" is on the conservancy's wish list of things to do this year, although it could cost more than \$3 million.

"One of my favorite sayings is that the only thing standing between me and my dreams is millions of dollars," she quipped.

The group campaigned to have the "Star Dome" created in time for the Super Bowl. "We thought it would be amazing, while the eyes of the world were on Houston, to have this going on next door," she said. "But I think they wanted the eyes of the world to be on football."

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### CORRECTIONS

A story on Page A2 on Friday misstated the size of the federal budget. It is \$3.5 trillion.

In a story on Page A2 on Thursday, Mayor Sylvester Turner misstated the Texas House's record on "sanctuary city" bills. A bill passed the House in 2011 but did not become law.



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### Tracking Trump's first 100 days

These are things President Donald Trump has approved to accomplish his first 100 days in office. Some require executive order or simply announcing his intention to do something, while others need congressional approval or could show legal challenges.

Executive order    Needs Congressional approval    Memorandum



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