

Summer job prospects for US teenagers worst in 58 years

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The Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston released a report in April on the projected summer job outlook for teens (between 16 and 19) in the US. The center estimates that only about 37 percent of teens will actually find work this summer, a dismal prospect even compared with the summer of 2000, when 52 percent of teens were able to find employment. In fact, the report points out that the 2004 summer job market will tie that of 2003 as the worst in the last 58 years!

For the last three years, between 8 and 9 million teens have looked for jobs each summer. Most are seeking extra money, work experience, and more generally, a chance to participate in society. However, the study points out that the number of jobs open to young people has “consistently and considerably” declined since early 2001. Between the summers of 2000 and 2003, the employment-to-population ratio of employed teens declined by 8.5 percentage points, this means that 1.5 million fewer teens found work in 2003 than in 2000.

The study based its projections for 2004 on a statistical model that uses the employment rates for teens between the months of January and April as a means of predicting the employment rates for the coming summer. This model is highly accurate. It predicted the summer employment rates for teens for the year 2000 to within 0.3 percentage points and that of 2003 to within 1.3 percentage points (the report overestimated the employment rates for the summer of 2003).

The report predicts a summer jobs rate of only 36.9 percent for 2004. If the model’s prediction is somewhat optimistic, as it was in 2003, the summer of 2004 may be the worst yet.

This data may seem strange given the constant assurances by the corporate news media that the economy is expanding. However, the study demonstrates that the recent, modest increase in hiring has been offset by a heavy influx of out-of-work adults, recently arrived immigrants, recent college graduates unable to find work in their field and retirees needing to supplement their incomes.

Andrew Sum, the primary author of the report, says that certain subgroups of teens are at even greater risk of not finding a summer job. The report demonstrates that the summer employment of teens is highly correlated with their household income level. Notably, the study shows that fewer than one third of youth that come from households with an annual income of \$20,000 or less were able to find work last summer. In contrast, more than 46 percent of those from households earning between \$60,000 and \$75,000 per year found a summer job.

Race/ethnicity was also a factor. African-American youth were the least likely of all racial groups to find employment, with only 23 percent of them finding a summer job in 2003. More than a third of Hispanic youth found work in 2003, whereas white young people enjoyed an employment rate of more than 50 percent. However, the household income level of an individual was the most reliable determinant of his or her summer employment rate. Those with the lowest household income were the least likely overall to have gained employment last summer.

Sum says, “The very low summer employment rate of teens is largely attributable to high rates of labor underutilization rather than lack of interest in work. During the past summer, more than 3 million teens were either unemployed, underemployed or members of the nation’s labor force reserve [those that want a job, but have given up looking because of the perception that there is no work available]. These idle labor resources hold down the economy, the earnings of young people, their work experience and their current purchasing power over goods and services.”

Sum also directly addresses a series of news reports from the summer of 2002. These reports misrepresented the real cause of the decline in summer youth employment rates, incorrectly focusing on a purported lack of desire among teens to work. Had these teens (the unemployed, underemployed and the labor force reserve) been able to find a job, the employment-to-population ratio would have risen by 16 percentage points to just less than 60 percent

employment. This data exposes as a fallacy the belief that most teens are somehow lazy, shiftless or just uninterested in work.

The WSWs spoke with teens at two malls in California—the Sherwood Mall in Stockton and the Pacific Garden Mall in Santa Cruz—to get their impressions of the job market this summer.

Tim, a 17-year-old high school senior who aspires to become an optometrist, told the WSWs that he has been looking for employment for six months and has not even received an offer to interview despite the fact he spends several hours a week looking. “I spend a lot less time looking for work lately,” he said. Tim feels that the job market is improving, but “we haven’t seen the effects yet.” Moreover, he said he is not alone, reporting that several of his friends are in the same position.

Ryan a 19-year-old high school graduate, says he has also had a difficult time finding work. He has been looking for three to four months and said, “It’s competitive, but there are jobs. If you know the right people and if you have a car then it’s a lot easier.” When asked about how his friends are doing in their search for jobs he said, “Of the five guys I know that didn’t go to college, two have found part-time jobs, two are still looking like me and one is in jail.” Ryan also noted involvement in the drug trade as an option some have chosen. “I know a couple of people that are selling drugs on the side just to get by.”

In Santa Cruz, we spoke with Stephanie, an 18-year-old who recently graduated from high school. She aspires to study history in college and become a museum curator some day. She told the WSWs that she has been searching for a job for more than a month, but “most places aren’t hiring right now at all.” She believes that her lack of experience is the biggest obstacle. “I haven’t got experience and those without experience have a harder time. Most adults are taking the jobs that young people would normally get. It’s ridiculous, I mean, you see middle-age men working behind the counter at Dairy Queen. Really, the only young people I know that have jobs are the ones that have worked through the school year, and I can’t do that because I want to keep my grades up.”

Sixteen-year-old Kayla told us that she has spent more than five months looking for work. She said, “Less money is definitely an obstacle. If you don’t have a car, can’t buy a uniform or don’t have work clothes, things are harder.” Kayla said she had been very persistent in her search for work, “I went back to the same places like four or five times in a row—they just wouldn’t hire me.” Like Ryan, she noted the increased involvement in drugs among her friends: “There is nothing to do around here and kids are just trying to kill time, so they start using drugs.” Ominously, Kayla

indicated that the situation may get worse soon. “I know a lot of people who are using this new drug called ‘shards.’ It is like an even stronger type of meth [methamphetamine]. It is more addictive than crack.” Kayla said she would like to become a psychologist or neurologist someday.

Finally, Josh, a 17-year-old grocery bagger at a health food store in downtown Santa Cruz expressed his frustration about the job market. “I looked for months before I found this job. The people here are really nice, but there is no chance of getting a raise and it is impossible to get promoted.” When asked what he thinks should be done, he responded, “It’s up to somebody in charge. Someone needs to create new jobs or at least create some alternative to the negativity...every aspect of it...gangs, drugs, violence.”

The report indicates that the record-breaking, low youth employment level constitutes an emergency. Following the recovery from the 1981-1982 and 1990-1991 recessions, it took four consecutive years of strong job growth to raise the summer teen employment rate by just 4 percentage points. Unlike the current situation, these modest recoveries were greatly aided by a summer jobs program for economically disadvantaged youth.

The authors of the report call on both President Bush and Congress to provide emergency funding to create such a program, citing such societal benefits as decreased delinquency, improvement of high school students’ literacy and work skills, and higher levels of public service.

However, considering the current administration’s budget proposal for fiscal year 2005, this call will certainly be ignored. The president has proposed the elimination of 128 programs in the coming year, almost all of which served children, the poor, the sick and those in public housing while increasing spending for the Department of Defense to \$401.7 billion, the Department of Homeland Security to \$31 billion, and the FBI to \$5.1 billion.



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