



Teens on the Street

Employment Rate for Teenagers Lowest in Decades

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May 13, 2004— Despite two straight months of solid job growth and a declining unemployment rate the summer job outlook for America's teens is the grimmest in decades.

Not all teens will land jobs this summer, as opportunities decrease for young adults.
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Normally, 2 million teenagers swell the work force during the summer. But over the last three years, with the economy in recession and then experiencing a tepid, jobless recovery, that number has dropped substantially. And it is worse than after the recessions of the early '80s and early '90s.

The Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston tracks the teen employment rate. That rate fell more than 8 percent last year, from 45 percent to less than 37 percent. That was the lowest rate since Northeastern began tracking the rate in 1948.

And this year? "It's still pretty bad," says Renee Ward, of Teens4Hire in Southern California, which acts as a bridge between teens and potential employers. "There are probably millions of teenagers out there who won't be able to find a job."

Ward adds bluntly "All of this is still dependent on the economy and whether or not there's openings. We still have mass layoffs."

'Everyone Feeling Pinch'

The struggle teens face this spring to find summer jobs is evident even in the upper-middle class New York suburb of Rye. At the high school, the search for a job — any job — has been frustrating.

"I've been looking for mothers' helpers jobs," says 10th grader Stephany Valencia, "and it's been very difficult. A lot of my friends don't have summer jobs, but they've been filling out applications."

One of those is ninth grader Norma Jean Lippmann. "Since I applied to so many places," she says, "I'm hoping I'll find something."

Down the hallway, in the office of the Rye Youth Council Employment Service, there's only a small measure of hope. The town put the office in the school some years ago. This year, there are very few people looking to hire teens. Says Director Sandy Jacoby "Everyone is feeling a bit of a pinch."

Teen Work Pattern Carries Over to Adulthood

One reason is that it usually takes two years of solid job growth after a recession for teen employment to rebound. As a result, ahead of teens in the employment line this summer are college graduates who can't find permanent jobs, unemployed adults and some of the 2 million immigrants who have come to the United States in the past three years.

Says Renee Ward, "Younger teens, younger than 18 years of age, they're going to have a really hard time."

Another problem is that the federal government has slashed funds for summer jobs programs for teenagers.

All of this together is doubly bad news for teenagers. Studies show that teens who have summer jobs have more substantial employment and higher wages as adults, especially those who don't finish college.

Adds Ward, "Young people, as teenagers who have a difficult time finding a job at this point in their lives will grow up to be adults who have a difficult time finding jobs."

Back in Rye, 15-year-old Kelly O'Callaghan has beaten the odds. "I think I'm pretty luck to be working as a lifeguard," she says.

And this summer, millions of other teens may agree.