

Job dearth this summer deprives kids of more than money

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By Amanda Paulson | Staff writer

Elvin Díaz can still remember the satisfaction of holding down his first job, three summers ago, at a technology center in Boston's South End.

"I felt on top of the world," says the high school junior, flashing a big grin. "I was actually doing something, not counting on my mom for help. Instead, I was helping her."

Elvin hopes to work again this summer, but jobs for teens may be scarcer than beach space in August. SummerWorks - a program run by Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD) that has helped Elvin and a few thousand other low-income teenagers get summer jobs - hasn't received state funding this year. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino has announced that the city's summer-job program will be cut nearly in half, and many local businesses are reducing summer staff.

Across the US, summer job prospects for teens are worse than they've been in decades. A result of a tight job market and strapped state and local budgets, it means fewer kids will be passing through the rite of passage that makes them camp counselors, interns, or short-order cooks for a few months. Not as devastating, certainly, as having a parent out of work, but experts worry in particular about the repercussions for low-income teens. Not only will the job hunt be tougher for them than for middle-class kids, but they tend to benefit even more from learning workplace skills early on, and may have fewer other options to keep busy.

"We're leaving a lot of kids idle who otherwise could have done something productive with their time," says Andrew Sum, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University. "For low-income kids, it'll be a really, really rough summer."

Last year Dr. Sum helped author a report showing that the 2002 summer job market was the toughest for teens in 37 years, but this year, he says, will be worse.

After many failed phone calls, Renee Ward agrees. Every day, the director of the Internet site teens4hire.org spends much of her time calling amusement parks, retail stores, banks, and restaurants, asking if they'll hire teenagers this summer.

Most, she says, tell her they're cutting back, or not hiring at all. Few are willing to spring for the \$29 it takes to put an ad on her site, a national job clearinghouse for teens. So far, only a few hundred employers are registered - peanuts, considering the 70,000 teens she estimates are searching the site for jobs at any given time.

"I'm finding it across the board," she says. "In Houston, in New York, in California. Texas is particularly bad."

Deep cuts for the lowest rung

That it's tougher for teenagers to find traditional summer work as waiters or salesclerks isn't surprising. They're usually the lowest rung of hires, and this summer many companies don't have to reach that low. But that's one more reason, experts say, why subsidized jobs that cities typically provide are even more important this year - and why the cuts in nearly all those cities are felt even harder.

"[Jobs] are a motivating factor to keeping kids in school and exposing them to the job market," says Margaret Stix, associate director of the New York City Employment and Training Coalition, which manages the city's youth employment centers. At this point, it's uncertain if the state will fund New York's summer-job program. Even if it does, Ms. Stix says, it would fund jobs for about 20,000 kids - less than half the number it served in the past.

Stix and others say part of the problem is the 1998 Workforce Investment Act, which drastically cut national subsidies for teen summer work. For a few years, it didn't matter; there was enough state and city money. But now, with cities laying off full-time workers, it's hard for even the most committed mayors, such as Boston's Menino, to justify funding teen jobs.

Here in Massachusetts, some lawmakers worry that the state is depriving kids of all options. Take the city baseball fields, which will start charging \$40 for lights, says state Rep. Brian Wallace (D). He expects the fee will keep many kids from playing. "This year they might do neither - no work and no baseball. We have to come up with some creative solutions to keep kids occupied, to keep them off the streets.... We're cutting back on everything."

More than just a paycheck

Representative Wallace has clear memories of his own first paycheck - for \$70 at age 14. He got a job through ABCD, cleaning lots around South Boston. "I thought I owned the world," he says. "Just knowing I was going to get a check every two weeks and could give something for my mother.... I could see the pride in [my parents'] eyes."

For Elvin, having a job the past three summers gave him a goal in life. While working at the Wentworth Institute of Technology two years ago, he became fixated on mechanical engineering. "Something clicked in my mind," says Elvin, looking amazed. "I saw my whole future then."

He returned to work there last summer, and has joined an after-school engineering program.

Elvin hopes to work at Wentworth again this summer, but says he'll understand if the money isn't there. He worries more about some of the younger kids. "If more jobs like these are offered, it could open their eyes."