

Record number of teens just say no to summer jobs

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By Stephanie Armour

The summer job, once a rite of passage for teens, is fading faster than a suntan.

Studies indicate teenagers are forsaking work at a record pace: Labor market participation among the age group has sunk to its lowest point in almost four decades. It's a shift that could mean more hiring woes for employers, but experts say it also means more teens are missing out on entry-level work experience. Instead of paychecks, they're focusing earlier than ever on career-builders such as academic programs and internships. For example:

? The number of teens ages 16 to 19 who worked or looked for work during the month of July last year dropped to 60.6%, according to the Labor Department, the lowest since 1964. Analysts expect this July's number to be even lower.

? It's not just summer jobs. Economists say teens in general are shunning work. Just about half of males age 16 to 19 were in the labor force last year, according to the Labor Department. That's the lowest participation since the agency first started keeping the statistic in 1948.

? Many teenagers who are working tend to be in internships or temporary work that allows them to learn professional skills, hiring experts say. It's a shift from the traditional burger-flipping job. And if they're not paid, they're not counted among the working.

"I'm working at a financial services firm in New York, and I'm not getting paid," says Matt Cohen, 19, of Marlboro, N.J., adding that the internship is more important than a paycheck from waiting tables. "I wanted to have career experience."

? Some economists say the recession left fewer jobs available and that teens are being displaced from entry-level jobs by workers laid off during the downturn.

Studies bear that out. With older, more experienced workers available now, employers aren't wooing young hires with the zeal seen a few years ago: 95% of employers said they wouldn't actively advertise for teen workers this summer even though they had openings they could fill, according to a June poll of more than 1,000 employers by online job matching service Teens4Hire.org.

? Economists say stock market or income gains in some households made more teens feel less need to work.

"They may think, 'I'm not going to work this summer.' Mom and Dad may be willing to pick up the bill," says Martin Regalia, chief economist at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

? Intense academic competition has parents pushing teens into summer learning programs and camps instead of entry-level jobs, experts say. More teens plan to attend college full time, research shows, and fewer have set their sights on working.