

Teens seek work in tough market

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By Barbara Hagenbaugh, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Teens this summer are facing one of the toughest job markets in years, and two-thirds likely will end up tanning at the swimming pool rather than wading in the labor pool.

The tight job market means more teens ages 16 to 19 will be idle this summer, giving them less work experience down the road. It will also squeeze already tight family budgets in a sluggish economy.

"Teens are at the bottom end of the (hiring) rung," said Renee Ward, executive director of Teens4Hire.org. "As time goes on, if you have difficulty getting a job now, that's going to carry through" to the future.

Going into the summer, the unemployment rate for teens in the workforce was 18.5% in May. That's up from 18% in April and the highest in nine years, the Labor Department said Friday. The unemployment rate for black teens was 37% last month, more than double the rate of whites, 15.3%.

With the overall unemployment rate at 6.1% last month, up from 6% in April and the highest since July 1994, teens are being forced to compete with new college grads who are jobless, current college students who can't find paid internships, and even laid-off adults for what seems to be a smaller pool of summer jobs.

Ashley Radmacher of Webster, Texas, is about to get her driver's license and is looking for a job to buy a car and to pay for insurance. She hasn't found anything despite searching since March. "I'm starting to get desperate," the 16-year-old said. "I'll go to Whataburger (restaurant), places I didn't want to work. But I have to get a job."

The teen employment rate — the percentage working out of the total teen population — will fall nearly three percentage points to 36.7% this summer, Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies predicted in a report last week. That would be the lowest level on record, said the study, which was commissioned by the National League of Cities.

Luis Armando Ramirez, 16, of El Paso, has put in applications at three fast-food restaurants but hasn't had any luck. "They just tell me that they'll call me," he says.

Examples of the competition:

- One retailer who put an ad on Ward's site, www.teens4hire.org, had 6,092 applications for 75 jobs nationwide within 30 days.
- Cedar Point amusement park in Sandusky, Ohio, is on track to receive 16,000 applications — four for every position — this year. That's about the same as last year, which was up 15% from 2001.
- The City of Phoenix received 3,500 applications for 940 slots for summer jobs.