The Slow Economy May Cool This Summer's Seasonal Hiring
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Last summer, Arielle Silverman, an 18-year-old high-school student from New York, spent many days going from store to store looking for work along with a friend of hers. But she never got hired. The most encouraging response she got came from a natural-soap store in her neighborhood that told her it might have a job if she come back this year.

Three weeks ago, Ms. Silverman noticed the store had shut down.

Now she has reached a decision: Instead of spending another fruitless summer looking for work, she will work -- maybe for salary, she says, but maybe not -- at a Texas theater camp she once attended. "It's impossible to find a summer job," she says. "Unless you know someone, you can forget it."

As the economy continues to struggle, teenagers across the country are finding an already dismal employment scene growing even worse. Many of the employers that typically hire teens, such as retailers, amusement parks and fast-food restaurants, have been holding back on hiring. Many government-funded summer-job programs have faced major cutbacks.

Many think this year will be even tougher than last year, which was the worst for teen employment in 37 years, according to a report from the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education and Families. The report was prepared by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston.

"We expect that millions of teens who want jobs will not be able to find them," says Renee Ward, executive director of Teens4Hire.org, an online career center for employers and teens in Huntington Beach, Calif. "This year's group, aged 14 to 19, will get an awakening unlike the group in the late 1990s."

Aggravating the situation, the downturn also seems to be prompting more teens to apply for jobs, increasing competition. Holiday World, a theme park in Santa Claus, Ind., says it received a record 880 applications for this season, mostly from teenagers. That's a 25% increase from last year. Although Holiday World plans to hire 50 more employees than the 1,000 it hired last year, it's also getting more interest from adults and college students who can't find work elsewhere, says Will Koch, the owner and general manager.

Indeed, adult job-seekers are putting a damper on teen employment elsewhere, too. An annual career fair held primarily for teenagers in Wichita, Kan., was recently canceled because adults were getting many of the jobs traditionally given to teenagers. Organizers for the Wichita career fair say that as many adults as teens attended last year's three fairs and fewer businesses had available jobs.

Some employers admit that teenagers often lose out in competitive job situations because of the teenagers' limited availability, says Bill Berg, president of coolworks.com, a Web site for seasonal jobs in Gardiner, Mont. Employers at places like national parks, resorts, camps and amusement parks often are looking for people who can work through Labor Day, for instance. Many teenagers can't work that long because they have to get back to school.

To help teen job-seekers this summer, Teens4Hire.org has asked over 650 major employers with possible jobs for teens to advertise on their site. They have also asked every major Chamber of Commerce to ask their members for opportunities that teens can fill.

Although Teens4Hire's job posting fee is $29 for 60 days, the site will allow every "legitimate" employer with job opportunities that teens could fill to post openings to the site free in April, because the job market is so bleak.

Most teens are grateful for any opportunity. Billy Bryant, a 17-year-old from Hawesville, Ky., says he knew things were tough last fall when he was given only three hours of work each week at a local restaurant while older workers were getting more. This year he has secured a job at Holiday World for the summer. It will mean a one-hour commute each way, but, he says, "I'm not even worried about it."