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Teen job market might be tighter than dad's wallet

By David Nicklaus

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Many of us in the working world were teenagers when we first had to take orders from a boss or try to please a finicky customer. It's a great age to learn the pleasures and frustrations in earning a paycheck.

But fewer teens are getting that experience today. Last summer, just 36.5 percent of teens held jobs, the lowest figure since the government began keeping track in 1948. Andrew Sum, an economist at Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies, predicts that the teen job market will be only slightly better this summer, with perhaps 36.9 percent of teens finding employment.

The problem isn't that teens are lazy or too busy with school and sports. Mostly, the problem is a lack of opportunity.

Retailers, restaurants and other traditional teen employers are fielding plenty of applications from recent college graduates, immigrants and laid-off adults. Why take a chance on an inexperienced teen?

"Teenagers are at the back of the queue all the time," Sum said. "A lot of employers will admit: 'Look, I've got plenty of adult applicants. I don't need to look at kids.'"

The teenage unemployment rate, at a seasonally adjusted 16.9 percent in April, has come down from its peak of 19 percent last summer. But that tells only part of the story.

Teens are quick to give up on a job search when they and their friends aren't getting hired. When they stop looking, they're no longer counted as unemployed. That's why Sum focuses on the employment-to-population ratio.

The ratio peaked at 45 percent in the summer of 2000. It went higher during earlier economic booms - 49 percent in the late 1970s and 48 percent in the late 1980s - which seems to suggest that some longer-term factors are at work. Rising affluence might mean some teens don't need to work, and stretched-out school schedules make it hard for others to fit in a summer job.

Sum believes that the problem is mostly economic. And he thinks teen jobs will remain hard to find for the next couple of summers.

"Generally, it takes three to four years of really strong job growth to raise the kids' employment rate by 3 to 4 percentage points," he said.

The lack of jobs is especially hard on low-income teens. In families with incomes below \$20,000, just 33.7 percent of teens held jobs last summer, compared with 52.7 percent in families earning more than \$75,000. There's also a racial disparity: 50.4 percent of white teens are employed, compared with 23.6 percent of black teens.

Those figures show a geographic mismatch, says Russell Signorino, a labor-market expert who's a vice president at the United Way of Greater St. Louis. Jobs in retailing and other teen-friendly industries are much easier to find in high-income areas.

"In the older urban and suburban parts of the area, there are fewer and fewer jobs available every year," Signorino said. "The teenagers residing in those areas are going to have a hard time finding work."

In the past, federal jobs programs have helped more urban youth. Sum says just 15,000 teens worked in such programs last year, compared with more than 500,000 in the late 1990s.

The St. Louis Agency for Training and Employment has hired 500 teenagers for summer jobs, down from 700 three years ago, agency director Tom Jones said. In the mid-1990s, federal funds enabled SLATE to hire more than 1,200 teens each summer.

"We could employ a lot more youth if we had more money," Jones said.

At a time when many breadwinners find themselves out of work, some people might not have much sympathy for the unemployed teenager.

But teens with jobs are less likely to break the law, less likely to become pregnant and less likely to drop out of high school. Five years down the road, they tend to hold better-paying jobs than people who didn't bag groceries or serve ice cream as teens. Those are good reasons we should care about the dearth of opportunities facing young people.

E-mail: dnicklaus@post-dispatch.com

Phone: 314-340-8213

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