

# Are teen jobs becoming a luxury good?

A sharp decline in work for youth is depriving a generation of key skills—especially the kids who need them most

By Ruth Graham

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Teenagers who work in high school end up with better adult jobs and higher incomes, according to studies, as well as stronger “soft skills” like dependability, punctuality, confidence, and communication.

With the last day of school appearing on the horizon at last, this is the time of year that many teenagers have traditionally begun to think about finding a summer job. Once upon a time, this was a simple task: Stroll down the street, fill out a few one-page applications by hand, and you’d soon be scooping ice cream, trimming hedges, or folding sweaters.

As recently as 2000, 45 percent of Americans age 16-19 worked in some capacity in an average month. These days, only about a quarter do, the lowest rate since just after World War II. Last summer, just over 30 percent of teenagers had a job in June or July, when teen employment tends to peak.

That has many experts wondering just what will happen to the vast majority of today’s teens, who are not working at all. “This is the first generation that will not have major work experience as part of their adolescent development,” said Jeylan Mortimer, a sociologist at the University of Minnesota who has [studied teenagers and work](#). “This raises major concerns.”

Teenagers who work in high school do far more than earn extra spending money. They end up with better adult jobs and higher incomes, according to studies, as well as stronger “soft skills” like dependability, punctuality, confidence, and communication. For boys, especially, the chances of enrolling in and graduating from college are significantly higher for those who worked in high school. “Work experience matters a lot,” said Paul Harrington, director of the Center for Labor Markets and Policy at Drexel University. “It matters for every kid, in every way possible.”

Work may matter for every kid, but, experts are learning, not every kid has an equal chance of working. The more a family earns, the more likely its teenagers are to work. In the summer of 2012, according to a report from the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, only 21 percent of teenagers from low-income families worked at all, compared to 38 percent of teenagers with household incomes between \$100,000 and \$150,000. Meanwhile, white teenagers were twice as likely to have worked last summer as black teens.

Taken together, this means white teenagers from wealthy families—who are already ahead in practically every way imaginable—are also the likeliest by far to have jobs. Whatever it is that early jobs provide—pocket money, work experience, soft skills—those benefits are going disproportionately to this more privileged group.

The tightening teen job market has energized advocates and policy makers. In April, President Obama announced the recipients of \$107 million in federal grants to schools and organizations to connect high-school students to career opportunities. (The winners included Boston-based Jobs for the Future.) Locally, Mayor Martin J. Walsh [told the Globe in March](#) that he hoped to get 12,000 Boston teens employed this summer, by [partnering with local businesses](#) willing to hire them. But the decline in job opportunities for disadvantaged teenagers is so drastic that it may take more than these optimistic public programs to turn it around. And that may mean reckoning more directly with the fact that teenage jobs seem to be turning from a rite of passage into a luxury good—just one more thing that stratifies Americans before their adult lives even begin.

**Certain parents** and educators have long been wary of teenagers working during the school year, based on understandable fears that paid work interferes with homework or prompts children to grow up too fast. Indeed, there is some evidence that students working more than 20 hours a week while still in high school are likelier to drink and smoke, and earn lower grades. As recently as 2000, research into teenagers and work was driven largely by concerns that they were doing too much of it.

Today, however, there is increasing emphasis on the idea that work offers a positive life value that goes beyond the value of a paycheck. Mortimer’s research has found that those working heavy hours in high school are more likely to move directly into “career” jobs soon after high school, the ideal outcome for those disinclined to college. Some researchers even question the importance of the 20-hour dividing line, saying once they account for things like previous grades and family socioeconomic status, the negative effects of working “too much” disappear.

Either way, since at least the mid 1990s, at least one thing’s been clear: As long as young people are employed for less than 20 hours a week, work experience confers tremendous benefits. Recent research has found that teenagers who work in high school and college wind up with salaries 16 percent higher than teens who don’t work. Young people themselves report that working helps them overcome shyness and learn to take responsibility. Teenagers report high levels of job satisfaction, and when researchers ask adults about their own teenage work experiences, they are overwhelmingly positive.

“Work is really a child’s first interaction with the adult world,” Harrington said. “Knowledge, skills, and abilities vary across occupations, but behavioral requirements don’t vary that much. The sine qua non is behavior.” He coauthored a 2013 report on how public and private institutions can help boost teen employment, which argued that early work experience is crucial to jobs throughout a teen worker’s future career. “The workplace is a lot less forgiving of attendance and punctuality issues than a lot of educational settings are,” said his coauthor, Nancy Snyder, president of the Commonwealth Corporation, a quasi-public Boston organization devoted to youth employment. “That’s really where a lot of teens and young adults end up acquiring those really basic work behaviors.”

In particular, there is evidence that low-income teens and those who struggle with school benefit most dramatically from working. Mortimer and Pennsylvania State University sociologist Jeremy Staff are currently working on a

longitudinal study on adolescent employment that began with 1,000 teenagers in 1988. In a 2007 paper based on that research, they found that what they call “low-promise” respondents—those who have poor grades and low education goals—were almost three times as likely to acquire a college degree if they worked consistently approximately 14 hours a week, than similar teens who didn’t work at all. For those young people, “having a positive work experience can help to turn you around,” Mortimer said. “For those who have a lot of disadvantages, any positive experience is likely to have a greater impact than on people with lots of advantages already.” Intriguingly, black and Hispanic teens also seem less likely to be harmed by working long hours.

It’s an unfortunate irony that as teenage work has declined, [those who benefit the most from it have been hit the hardest](#). Black, Hispanic, and low-income teenagers have long been less likely to work, in part because they often live in neighborhoods with fewer job opportunities and tend to have fewer family connections to employment. Research by economist Andrew Sum, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies, has found that low-income teen workers are likelier than wealthier teens to use their earnings to contribute to family income—sometimes even contributing enough to boost their families out of poverty.

The employment rate has been plummeting about equally among every teen demographic over the last decade, but because poor and minority teens started so far behind, there are particularly steep odds against their finding work today. “If you’re black or Hispanic or low-income, you’re considerably less likely to work at any point at time,” said Sum, who has researched teen employment for years. “The costs of joblessness are not equally borne across all young populations. They are borne disproportionately by low-income minority youth.” Last summer, almost half of all white male teens with family incomes between \$100,000 and \$149,000 had jobs, in contrast to just 9.1 percent of black male teens with families in the lowest income group.

**Helping jobless teenagers** is a complicated problem: It requires not just economic measures, but outreach to both employers and young people themselves. Because overall teen employment rates were decreasing even before the recession, no one seems confident that they will naturally bounce back as the economy continues to improve. “I don’t see reason to be hopeful that this is going to change,” Mortimer said. “Now is a very bad time, but even when the economy improves, it seems unlikely we’re going to go back to the ’80s or the ’50s.”

The reasons for the last decade’s dramatic drop-off in teen employment are not fully understood, even by experts who have been studying the issue for years. Some have speculated that the drop can be attributed to more teens going to college, though this cannot fully explain the decline. The percentage of teens who say they want a job has dipped only slightly, so the change cannot be chalked up to changing preferences. A large part of it can obviously be attributed to the current downturn in the economy. But a significant part of the shift may come down to how automation and outsourcing are putting the squeeze on the labor market in general. As jobs up and down the professional scale disappear, teens, at the very bottom of the ladder in terms of skills, experience, reliability, and ability to work full time, are naturally the first to lose out, while more adults resign themselves to the kind of minimum-wage work once assigned to teenagers. “When we ask employers, ‘Why are you hiring a college grad for this job?’ they say, ‘Because I can,’” Harrington said.

Alicia Sasser Modestino, senior economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston’s New England Public Policy Center and coauthor of [a 2013 report on youth employment](#), said she sees two kinds of teenagers who aren’t working: Those who are opting out of the labor force in favor of volunteering, unpaid internships, and extracurricular activities (who are likelier to be privileged), and those who want to be working and simply cannot find jobs. It’s the latter group—who don’t have the resources to tap alternate sources of what economists call “human capital”—that has stoked fears of a lost generation of teenagers.

A wide network of programs have arisen to try to catch these teens before they fall behind in earnings, education, and engagement. The Commonwealth Corporation, for example, maintains training programs for teenagers and works with businesses that agree to hire them. Massachusetts is one of only a few states to devote public funding to teen jobs; the state-funded YouthWorks program has supported thousands of low-income teen workers over the years. (A report published last year suggested that another teen work program [reduced summer violence](#) among low-income teenagers in Boston.) Nonetheless, the teen employment rate in the state has dropped by half since the turn of the

millennium. And many such programs rely on inconsistent sources of public funding: In February, more than 1,000 young people rallied at the State House to push for up to \$24.5 million in summer jobs funding next year.

Another solution may lie in high schools, which have historically seen themselves as competing with jobs for the attention of teenagers. The exception has been career and technical education, or CTE, schools, which have a stated mission to help connect students with work. Harrington and Snyder's 2013 report showed that employers view students from these schools much more positively than other teenagers. "It's unclear to me why [non-CTE] schools feel they have to stay away from the world of work," Harrington said. "I don't know if it's academic snobbery or what."

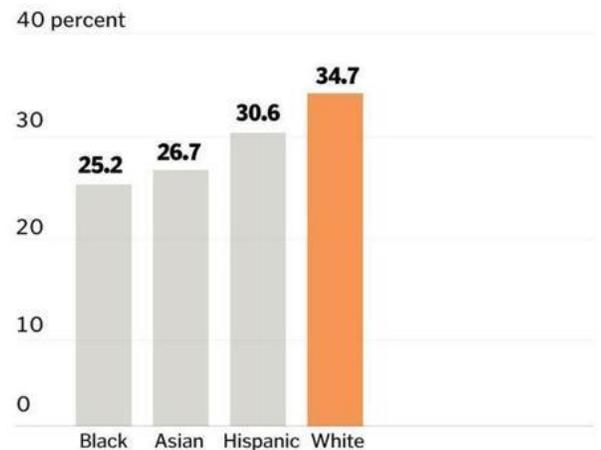
In the meantime, the teen employment crisis—and its uneven distribution—raises troubling questions for a country that prides itself on providing equal opportunities for those who are willing to work hard. "It's not just a matter of kids getting some extra pocket money," Sum said. "Kids who don't work carry this burden throughout adulthood." For many of today's teenagers, of course, the larger social solutions may be beside the point. For them, this month, the more pressing problem will be finding and securing one of those ever scarcer jobs.

*Ruth Graham, a writer in New Hampshire, is a regular contributor to Ideas.*

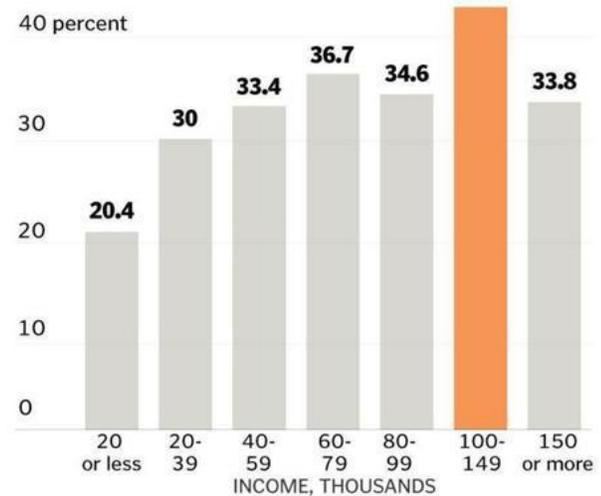
## Teen job numbers

White teenagers from wealthy families — who are already given many advantages in life — are the likeliest to have jobs. Massachusetts employment for kids ages 16 to 19:

### Employment by race/ethnic group, 2012



### Employment by average household income, 2011-12



SOURCE: Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies  
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