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Teen Employment Crisis: More Support Needed for Work-Based Learning Opportunities

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There is no question that more must be done to enhance the employment opportunities of young, at-risk workers.

We believe that public policy must respond to the employment crisis that victimizes both young men and women, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For many young men and women, teen employment can be a crucial starting point on the path to sustained employment with an upward trajectory.

Teen employment has declined by more than 25 percent since 2006. In 2010, only one quarter of male teenagers were employed. For teens from low-income families, summer employment provides not only income, but also work experience that can distinguish teens within a competitive urban labor market and signal competence and professionalism to potential full-time employers.

The teen summer employment rate has fallen from over 50 percent in 2000 to just under one third a decade later. For black teens, 2010 employment rates are even lower—annually below 15 percent and below 20 percent in the peak summer months. Black female teens have just slightly higher employment rates than their male counterparts.

These racial differences should not lead policymakers to ignore the plight of white teens. While their official unemployment rate is modest, it belies the employment difficulties they face. White labor force withdrawals over the four years, 2006 to 2010, have been so substantial that their inclusion would more than double the white teen unemployment rate.

Benefits of Employment

Katherine Newman's study of Harlem fast-food workers demonstrated that employment benefits disadvantaged teens. Even low-skill employment may teach soft skills and problem solving skills critical for future employment, encourage school completion, give teen workers a positive identity as a productive member of society, connect them with other hard-working teens, and create a tangible opportunity cost to teen pregnancy and other risk behavior.

These positive findings contrast with the research about employment of middle class teens for whom employment – during the school year – of up to 20 hours has no beneficial impact and more than 20 hours has negative impact. Unlike middle class teens, low-income teens have lower access to adult mentorship and good schools, and employment may be a positive source for them.

Employment within fields that require more skills can enhance teens' human capital even further by providing a route to further training. Many firms promote their workers from within by providing training to their most valued workers.

The current U.S. education system encourages teens to begin their work lives with training at community and technical colleges. With a three-year graduation rate of 15 percent, community college may not be the most efficient way to begin careers. Training provided by firms through internal or external programs may streamline completion and give tangible encouragement to finish programs.

Rather than beginning with technical training, employment is seen as uniquely valuable to poor minority males as a way to keep them off the streets and out of prison. Employment may also allow women to be economically independent of their boyfriends, rather than relying on men for spending money. The research on the risks of economic dependence to American adolescents is just starting to emerge, but

extensive research in Africa has documented not only the harmful effects from “sugar daddies,” but also that unconditional influxes of income help teen women to avoid such exploitative relationships.

Programs That Promote Teen Employment

While teen employment is valuable by itself, it is even better when linked to high school education. Studies have found that career and technical education (CTE) programs in Florida and New York have been effective in moving youth forward.

Similarly, College Now programs linked to occupational training have been highly successful. One example is a five-year pilot program, Carpe Diem, which has linked ninth graders at Brooklyn vocational high schools with associate degree programs at the City University of New York. During their junior and senior high school years, students select up to four college-bearing courses that can be applied to one of the associate degree programs. Students also meet with industry partners, including some that offer internships to teach about the particular occupations.

Similarly, Career Academies provide career and technical education in which a sector-specific “academy” is part of a broader high school. Career Academy students take courses in career development and supplement their classroom education with summer and year-round employment.

Career Academies establish partnerships with local employers to provide work-based learning opportunities to improve student preparation for the workforce as well as college attendance. These programs have been shown to be effective for at-risk youth.

Government funding should be substantially increased in support of these endeavors and it should be available to all disadvantaged youth including women who can benefit substantially.

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