



Lab

With kids busier and parents wanting them to get experiences that help on college applications, the work force has shrunk
Job-seeking teens few and far between

By L.M. SIXEL

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For decades, it's been a rite of passage for teenagers to sack groceries, wash dishes and

mow lawns after school, on weekends and during the summer.

The part-time jobs provide teens with spending money, teach responsibility and, for the lucky ones, at least according to Hollywood, lead to a great romance that involves a lot of beach time.

But these days, working teenagers are becoming scarcer.

In 2006, 43.7 percent of teens nationwide between the ages of 16 and 19 were working or looking for work, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's down from 52 percent in 2000.

In Texas last year, even fewer teens were working — 40.6 percent, according to the government.

Experts chalk up the trend to several factors: More teens are in school than a decade ago, many parents prefer their kids to focus on their studies, and in some circles, teen labor almost has become a stigma because it implies the family needs the money.

"I think a lot of parents had a summer job, but the boomer mentality is that we want it to be easier for our kids than it was for us," said Jason Dorsey, the Austin author of *My Reality Check Bounced!* Dorsey, who lectures on generational differences at work, said many baby boomers define success as making sure their own kids don't have to work as hard as they did.

But Dorsey, along with several others, said it's precisely that effort and hard work that turned yesterday's teens into today's successful adults.

"Boomers became responsible adults because they were forced to work for everything they got," he said. "By not requiring us to earn it, they're weakening us or setting us up for some short-term challenges."

Work experience also gives teens the chance to try out different careers, Dorsey said. After a few months of toiling behind the counter at a fast-food restaurant, a teen is either interested in a customer-service career or never wants to greet another patron again.

But many experts say teens today just don't have the time.

"They're very busy at school and sports and clubs and music lessons," which makes it hard to squeeze in a job, said Daniel Russell, who as vice president for Aon Consulting in Atlanta advises restaurants and retailers on hiring and retention strategies.

And many parents see more value in their children's extracurricular activities than paying jobs because clubs and community service look good on college applications.

Consequently, many parents — especially affluent ones — prefer to just provide their teens with a good allowance to buy music or go to the movies with their friends, said Russell, who recalled his own high school job as a dishwasher so he could earn spending money.

The evidence isn't just anecdotal, said Russell, who has studied the common characteristics of service workers. To his surprise, Russell found their average age is 27 to 28, considerably older than he expected.

The shortage of teen workers has made hiring more difficult for businesses that have traditionally relied upon the young workers.

At the Houston Zoo, teens just aren't applying anymore, said Kathy Masid, general manager of retail sales. She compared the situation to five years ago, when she'd regularly see young applicants.

Masid, who oversees the big gift shop as well as the merchandise carts scattered around the zoo, said she has posted openings at area high schools but to no avail. And it doesn't matter what the jobs pay or that no experience is necessary.

"We can't even get them in the door to apply," said Masid, who said she has several openings, and the starting pay is between \$7.50 and \$8 an hour.

Dad's not convinced

Martin Perez has heard the arguments about the importance of work experience. But they're not convincing to the father of 17-year-old Amanda Perez, who'd prefer to see her focus on her school work, her charitable and sporting activities and just enjoy herself.

"My view comes from my parents," said Martin Perez, who is the operations manager and chief financial officer for the Houston Eyecare Clinic. "You can either go to school or you can work, but you can't do both."

Perez said his daughter, a Duchesne Academy junior who was recently inducted into the National Honor Society, is sometimes doing homework until the early morning hours, and he doesn't want her to lose that focus as she's preparing to apply to competitive colleges.

"She'll have plenty of time to learn what she needs to learn when she graduates," he said of working. Perez said he supplies Amanda with spending money when she wants to go to the movies and for other outings with friends.

He's even reluctant to encourage Amanda to take a summer job because he doesn't want her to get too used to the paychecks — yet.

"I tell her to be with her friends," Perez said. "Have fun. Be a kid. You can never get that back."

Amanda's mother, Scianna Serna, understands her former husband's arguments but leans more toward the value of gaining work experience, especially during the summer when Amanda has more free time.

"It's important to learn to interact with people in the business world," Serna said.

And her daughter's job last summer — working in the office for a janitorial firm for about three weeks — was flexible and the hours were reasonable.

But Serna is in full agreement with her ex about Amanda not working during the school year. "It's a very important year with applying for college," she said. "She doesn't have to work."

Amanda Perez said she can understand each point of view.

"I personally wanted to work this summer. I wanted a little independence, a little extra money so I don't have to ask my mom," she said. "It was a good experience because I learned how to relate to co-workers and the working environment."

But her dad won the summertime tussle, and Amanda turned in her notice to spend some time enjoying herself. She also went to Mexico to improve her Spanish, which, she noted, will be good for her college applications because it shows she has experience with other cultures.

"School is more demanding because it's such a race to get into college nowadays," she said. She wants to become a heart surgeon.

They need to work

Quite a few students at Austin High School work part time because their families need the income, school counselor Alfredo Vila said. Some others work to support a child or a child on the way.

"A lot of these kids have responsibilities like adults," said Vila, whose school had 86 percent of its students on the free or reduced-price lunch program last year.

One student whose car was impounded recently had a tough choice: He could work full time to earn the money to retrieve his car, or attend school and lose his car, which he desperately needs for work. He opted to work the extra hours and miss school, Vila said.

In a senior class of 304, about 250 have permission to leave campus during the day, said Vila, who estimates that most of them are either working or looking for work.

Anecdotally, Vila has noticed an interesting trend: A lot of Austin High parents, even if they're first-generation immigrants, are better off economically than they were five to 10 years ago, and they're encouraging their children to focus on school over part-time work.

There are still plenty of parents who believe in the benefits of work.

John Gall's daughter, Crystal, began working in the 11th grade after school as a cashier in a grocery store. She complained initially, Gall recalled, but then the 10 to 15 hours a week became part of her routine. And she liked the spending money.

It was an important lesson for Gall, who works with many unfocused teens in his job as outreach admissions supervisor for Texas Educational Foundation/Job Corps in Houston.

He said he saw his daughter go from spoiled to responsible as she learned how to get along with her boss and co-workers.

Getting organized

"You really learn how to balance," said Crystal Gall, who is now 21 and studying biology and pre-med science at a college in Pennsylvania. And she discovered that, by learning to juggle her commitments — she started using a schedule planner when she was 17 — she did everything better.

"I am incredibly organized," said Crystal Gall, who is working part-time at a big-box retailer while she's in college.

"That's daddy's rule," said John Gall, referring to their arrangement that he picks up the tab for college while his daughter earns her own spending money.

"I'm not going to pay for her to go to Bennigan's," Gall said. "It gives her a sense of reality — and she has to work to get some of the nicer things."

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