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Affluent teens twice as likely to find seasonal work

Teens facing a jobs gap as well, study finds

By Megan Woolhouse, Globe Staff May 28, 2015



Matthew J. Lee (left) and Joanne Rathe/Globe Staff

Mariah Redfern (left), a senior at Milton Academy, wants a summer job so she can buy clothes and cover some of the cost of attending American University in the fall. Halima Osman of Chelsea earns \$120 a week from a part-time job. She uses the money to help pay the bills for her family, which includes six siblings.

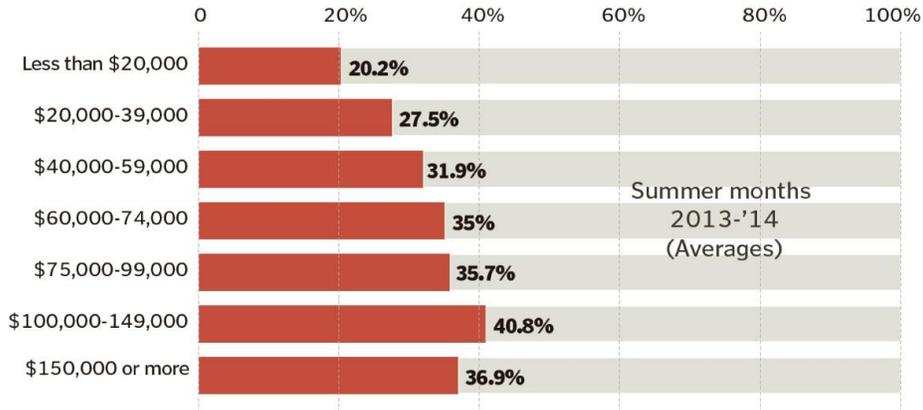
From her dorm room at Milton Academy, Mariah Redfern searches for a full-time summer job that will help her buy new clothes and pay for American University, which she will attend in the fall and where tuition alone tops \$40,000 a year.

Just 13 miles away, in a Chelsea apartment she shares with six siblings, Halima Osman searches for summer work so she can help her parents pay bills and expenses.

The two students have the same goal, but face wildly different odds in achieving it.

New research finds teenagers from upper-middle-class families land summer jobs at nearly twice the rate as those from poor families.

US teen employment rates by household income



SOURCES: Census; Center for Labor Markets and Policy, Drexel University

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For example, only 20 percent of teens from families earning less than \$20,000 a year are likely to find summer jobs, compared with about 40 percent from families earning more than

\$100,000, according to the Center for Labor Markets and Policy at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

“The gaps are huge,” said Ishwar Khatiwada, one of the study’s authors. This teen employment gap is another illustration of why the nation’s income divide is persistent and growing, as better-off families start with advantages that help their children get ahead, while low-income households struggle to break the cycle of poverty. Research shows that teens with summer jobs learn responsibility, punctuality, and other skills that give them a leg up when they enter the labor force as adults, helping them advance their careers and earn more over their working lives.

Khatiwada said that households with more than \$100,000 in earnings typically have two parents who are working. Teens living in these homes not only benefit from more income, but also from the emphasis on the importance of work and the additional connections their parents might have to help them find jobs. “The teens can draw upon their networks,” Khatiwada said.

The overall labor market for teens is expected to improve slightly this year, after record declines in the number of working teens following the last recession. A [study](#) last year by the Brookings Institution, a think tank, found that the percentage of employed teens had plunged by nearly half in a decade, to 24 percent in 2011.

This year, nearly 30 percent of teens are expected to work, according to the Drexel report, up from recent years, but still well below the 2000 peak of 52 percent.

Osman, the Chelsea teen, currently works about 10 hours a week at the nonprofit Chelsea Collaborative, earning about \$120 a week, which she said helps pay the bills for her

family, with children ages 2 to 16. Her mother cares for the children, and her father works at McDonald's.



Osman, 16, the oldest child, said she needs to earn more and hopes to land a full-time job this summer. But she said she felt discouraged after applying to more than a dozen retailers and getting no responses.

“People underestimate youth,” she said. “They don’t think they can work, and they usually look past them and look to adults.”

Redfern, the Milton Academy senior, said she got her first paycheck last year when she was accepted into a leadership program run by a nonprofit called The City School in Dorchester. The six-week program paid a stipend of \$100 per week, and participants learned about a range of issues, from community organizing to economic inequality.

She heard about the program from a friend at Milton Academy, which sponsored Redfern. She said her mother, a high-level insurance executive, also strongly encouraged her to get involved.

Redfern, 18, has yet to begin her search for a summer job, but she said she turned down offers to join classmates in post-graduation Caribbean vacations because she needs to look for a job. “We’re not so upper-crust that I don’t need to work,” she said. “You don’t know what you’re going to get, and kinda lucky if you get anything.”

Robert Pollin, an economist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and codirector of the Political Economy Research Institute, said there are no quick fixes to inequities that leave teens who could most use a job with the least chance of landing one. Community outreach and training programs, he said, are vital to helping people at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Mayor Martin J. Walsh is lobbying Boston companies to hire more city youths to complement the millions in state and local dollars that pay for teens to work at pools, parks, and in other public-sector jobs. Last year, he fell slightly short of a goal to employ 12,000 teens, but aggressively recruited employers for this summer, youth advocates said.

Halima Osman, 16, has applied for summer jobs in retailing but has not received any responses.

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Pollin noted, however, that teens from privileged backgrounds still have advantages because they receive guidance and support from parents that might not be available — or possible — in poor families.

For example, Pollin said, his godson had a job at a fast-food restaurant, but could not drive. Fortunately, his parents were willing to pick him up when his shift ended at 3 a.m. “These things matter hugely,” he said.

The Boston Private Industry Council, which places public school students in summer jobs, said its work has become more important as the employment rate among teens from low-income families has fallen faster than for those from affluent households.

The council helped place 2,700 Boston teens in private jobs last summer, 80 percent of whom qualified for free or reduced-price school lunches. Executive director Neil Sullivan said teens need access not only to education, but also to jobs, to help them and their families climb out of poverty.

“That’s the America we want, but the labor market data says that’s not happening,” Sullivan said. “Youth employment has to be a very conscious public-policy effort. Without that, the income gap grows wider, generation by generation.”

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