

FACTORS IN YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

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A recent cartoon depicted two young men on a street corner discussing their futures:

"The career counselor said I really have only two choices open to me."

"Me too. Which are you going to pick—crime or welfare?"

The reality isn't funny at all—not when we consider the high rate of unemployed youth. There are five significant factors contributing to the problem.

The first is credentialing. Employers expect job applicants to have a high school diploma or a college degree, regardless of whether the job requires one. The national enthusiasm for a college degree is reflected in the fact that 80 percent of our high school students intend to obtain a degree, but only 20 percent of the jobs *require* advanced education. The result is a surplus of educated workers and inflation of educational requirements for jobs that have not really become more difficult.

Employers use high school diplomas and college degrees as selecting and sorting mechanisms that substitute for discriminating personnel policies. For example, a utility company that offers meter reading as an entry level position may end up hiring mostly older people with two-year or four-year degrees. They say they want to hire people who will move up in the ranks of the company, and they claim that meter readers are their first line public relations staff. In reality, reading meters barely requires a high school diploma.

A second factor in youth unemployment is the lack of job skills. It

is common knowledge that inadequate preparation consigns a worker to the end of the employment line and the top of the lay-off list. This creates a cycle of recurring unemployment and underemployment.

The truth is that most students leave high school with absolutely no salable skills. Many high schools do not even offer adequate vocational education.

According to a report from the National Center for Educational Statistics, (1) About 25 percent of secondary-age students will drop out before graduation; (2) About 25 percent of those who graduate from high school will graduate from college; and (3) About 76 percent of secondary school students are enrolled in college-preparatory or general curriculum programs, and the balance of 24 percent are enrolled in vocational education programs.¹

Dropouts are especially vulnerable, because they often leave school before the junior or senior year when vocational programs are offered. The number of youngsters who drop out before high school graduation has remained about the same for the last ten years. Yet we now have a tremendous youth unemployment problem in this country, running about 20 percent and nearly 40 percent for black youth. Increasing the number of youth who stay in school would indirectly ease the unemployment problem.

A third factor in youth unemployment is age. Most employers do not want to hire young people until they are 20-21 years old. They suspect, and they may be right, that adolescents don't have enough experience. Employers are looking for more than job skills. To them, prior work experience increases the chances that a person will be punctual, responsible, and stable; they assume those qualities don't exist until a person has



Young people have trouble finding jobs because they don't get occupational guidance and training. Employers contribute to the problem because they want older workers with diplomas and degrees.

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aged a bit. One reason they prefer to hire workers who already have experience is that American industry doesn't offer a great deal of formal training, particularly for entry-level positions. In the past, for males at least, the army filled the in-between time, and it still does for some. For others, the formula is: "Four years to get a high school diploma; four more years to become four years older; then a real job."

The fourth major obstacle in the school-to-work transition is the lack of occupational and job-seeking information available to youth. Connections remain inadequate at the crossovers between education and employment, and between employment and education. Too many young men and women now leave school without a well-developed sense of purpose. In fact, high school students often find out about real life careers only after learning the hard way.

Most efforts of guidance counselors are directed at seniors, which eliminates most prospective dropouts. Academic students are more likely to receive guidance than vocational students,² because counselors say it's easier to work with college-bound youngsters. Actual discussion of job plans with either group is even less frequent, and the service least provided by schools is job placement.

Successful entry into the labor force involves more than just marketable skills; youth need additional nontechnical skills to facilitate their transition from school to work. They need to know how to locate jobs, how to interview for jobs, and how to deal with job pressures. Our society has a great deal of occupational information, but it is not packaged in a way to be transferred from teacher, counselor, or parent to students.

Are Jobs Available?

The fifth problem is related to the availability of work in America. *Fortune* magazine pored through the want ads of a small city newspaper one day, and concluded that "when it comes to jobs for the unemployed, there may be less than meets the eye."³ There were 228 want ads in one day; of the 142 full-time jobs within commuting distance, 100 required a special skill and the 42 unskilled jobs were filled within two

weeks, most in 48 hours. In addition, many women settle for entry-level jobs at low salary levels as a means to get back into the work force. As a result, many entry-level jobs that formerly went to youth are no longer readily available.

On the other hand, Don Barker points out that:

1—There is a growing shortage of skilled employees.

2—Plant engineers across the country still list as their number one problem finding trained, qualified, professional skilled-trades workers.

3—Many companies have indicated they'll lose *half* their work force in the next five years.⁴

The factors involved in youth unemployment are several and intertwined. If we could write a recipe for young people to ease the transition process, it would look something like this: (1) get a diploma; (2) acquire a salable skill; (3) grow older; (4) gather occupational information; and (5) hope there's a job waiting.

But the high school dropout and the unemployed high school graduate soon become society's problems. What responsibility do educators have in this area and what can educators reasonably do? For one thing, we can improve the image of vocational education by eliminating outdated programs and assessing current and future shifts in technology. Second, we can expand career development and exploration programs and improve the quality of work experience programs. We can further integrate general education and vocational education curriculums. And most of all, we can increase collaborative efforts of all segments of the community to bring education and work closer together. ■

¹ National Center for Educational Statistics, *Projections of Educational Statistics to 1983-1984* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1975).

² Sam A. Levitan, Garth L. Mangum, and Ray Marshall, *Human Resources and Labor Markets: Labor and Manpower in the American Economy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

³ Herbert E. Meyer, "Jobs and Want Ads: A Look Behind the Words," *Fortune* (20 November 1978).

⁴ Don Barker, "Industry's Struggle for Skilled Workers," *VocEd* (February 1979): 26-68.

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