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Our view: 'Why don't you get a job?'

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One of the favorite pastimes of the older generations is to look back on the past through rose-colored glasses. And with so few teenagers holding jobs these days, it's easy for their elders to assume that laziness is the culprit. Why work all summer, after all, when you could spend your time at the beach?

But as a handful of recent studies show, the market for the types of jobs teens and young adults are qualified for is fierce -- and much of the competition comes from the older generation itself.

As Mark Melnik of the UMass Donohue Institute writes in the latest edition of the journal *Mass Benchmarks*, "participation by young adults in the Massachusetts labor force has been trending downward. ... At the same time, employment rates by workers age 55 and older have increased, suggesting competition with young workers for scarce employment opportunities."

The trend has serious implications for younger and older workers.

Massachusetts was once a national leader in youth employment, consistently ranking in the top 10 of states, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Then came the Great Recession. Since 2007, 16- to 19-year-olds have experienced the most dramatic decline in employment of any age group, followed by 20- to 24-year-olds.

While the overall state unemployment rate has recovered over the past decade, younger workers -- or want-to-be workers -- have been left behind.

Today, Massachusetts ranks in the bottom quarter nationally, with just 26 percent of teens and 61 percent of young adults holding jobs. The problem is more acute for youths from low-income and minority families. As the study notes, children from higher-income, white families have an easier time finding jobs.

Teens need these jobs, not just to save money for college or to learn responsibility but to begin to develop the skills needed for successful, fulfilling careers.

"Teenagers and young adults participating in the workforce develop occupational employment skills earlier in life than those who do not join the labor force until later," Melnik said. "Early participation in the labor force also provides opportunities for networking and developing professional connections."

Those connections, Melnik said, "are particularly important among low-income residents." Early employment, he notes, "leads to a higher lifelong earning potential."

One of the challenges is that many of the jobs once held by youth are being given to older workers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 1 in 5 Americans 65 and older are working or seeking work. And who can blame them? The Great Recession hit almost every demographic hard, leaving Baby Boomers who once hoped to retire facing a dwindling nest egg and rising housing and health insurance costs. According to the Employee Benefit Research Institute, only 57 percent of people between 55 and 64 have enough savings to last through retirement.

In fact, the pollster Gallup notes that 74 percent of all adults now plan to work past retirement age, up from 14 percent in 1995.

What to do? The challenges facing workers nearing or past retirement age have been well publicized -- namely, the high cost of housing and health care. We are, of course, in the middle of a great national debate about the future of health care. Locally, however, much more lies within our control, especially when it comes to welcoming the kind of housing development that allows seniors to live lives that aren't consumed with worry about keeping a roof over their heads.

For youth employment, a good first step would be to emulate the successes of groups like F1rstJobs, the North Shore Workforce Investment Board's summer employment initiative. Last year, the program worked with 180 private and nonprofit partners to find jobs for 597 teenagers. There's more work to be done: In all, 1,529 youths came to the program looking for employment. Many of the private companies using the program were pleased with the results, giving us hope even more teens will be hired this year. It would be the type of job growth the region sorely needs.

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