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Teenage Employment and Career Readiness

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Abstract

Most American youth hold a job at some point during adolescence, but should they work? On the one hand, critics of teenage employment argue that most teenage jobs have little career potential, provide few new skills, take away time from schoolwork and extracurricular activities, foster negative attitudes toward work, and encourage problem behaviors. On the other hand, research shows that some early work experiences do not undermine academic performance and school activities, and some jobs can prepare youth for careers in adulthood by providing useful skills, facilitating the exploration of potential careers, and expanding social networks. This chapter presents a broad overview of teenage employment in the United States and explores whether (and how) early work experiences function to promote career readiness and social development. We begin by describing which teenagers work and for how long and then focus our attention on the consequences (both good and bad) of paid work in adolescence. We present recent nationally representative data from the Monitoring the Future Study (2010) that suggests limited hours of paid work do not crowd out developmentally appropriate after-school activities. Moreover, a review of the extant literature supports the idea that employment for limited hours in good jobs can promote career readiness and positive development. We conclude by discussing implications of youth work for practitioners and policy makers delivering career-related programming.

Teenage Employment and Career Readiness

The goal of career programming is to ready youth for the world of work. To accomplish this goal, young people are: (1) encouraged to consider the type of career they would like to have in adulthood and the schooling needed to pursue this career; (2) provided substantive training to develop a particular skill; (3) taught how to find, obtain, and keep a job; and (4) mentored or closely supervised in the workplace. Although youth can learn about the world of work through these career programming initiatives, many adolescents learn about work by holding part-time jobs. Similar to career programming efforts, early workplace experiences can help young people decide what occupations they would like to pursue later in life and what job characteristics are important to them (such as the degree of autonomy, pay, or the chance to help others).¹ Work in adolescence can also provide vocational training and enable young people to develop soft-skills that are valued by employers (for example, punctuality, dependability, and teamwork).² In addition, proponents of youth work have long emphasized that employment can provide opportunities for young people to interact with adult supervisors and coworkers in a structured and productive setting.³ In short, many teenagers learn about work by working.

In this article, we consider the vocational and developmental benefits of early experiences in paid work, as well as the ways in which working during adolescence may, paradoxically, undermine career readiness. We discuss who works during adolescence and how much, and highlight the decline in youth employment during the recent economic recession. We

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conclude with a discussion on how career-programming initiatives can best help teenagers prepare for their future careers.

Entering the Workplace

For the majority of youth, work begins early in adolescence.⁴ By the eighth grade, for example, many youth will have already worked for pay. These first jobs are often informal in character, temporary, and limited in hours, as girls typically are employed as babysitters and boys work in yard maintenance activities. After age 16, youth transition into a diverse range of jobs and work intensities (in other words, average weekly work hours). Teenagers typically spend more time working on weekend days and during the summer than on weekdays and during the school year.

Whether and how much teenagers work depends on a number of background factors such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and the socioeconomic status of their families.⁵ As previously mentioned, older teenagers are more likely to work, and spend longer hours on the job, than younger youth. Girls begin work at slightly younger ages than boys, but they average similar hours of work when employed. Black and Hispanic youth are less likely to work than white youth, but when they do work, they spend longer hours on the job. Youth from disadvantaged family backgrounds are less likely to work than their more advantaged counterparts, but again they average higher hours of work during the week when they are employed.⁶

Early workplace experiences, career readiness, and positive development

Do early workplace experiences help prepare youth for future careers? Is paid work in adolescence developmentally beneficial? There are two sides to this issue. On the one hand, there is the view that employment, at best, has little effect on career readiness and social development, and at worst, it leads to poor adjustment and undermines long-term success in the labor market.

In line with this negative view of teenage employment is the popular conception that the jobs available for teenagers are dull and monotonous. If asked to think of a typical teenage job, many Americans would conjure up an image of a youth doing repetitive, mindless work in a fast food restaurant. The argument is that teenagers often work in jobs little career potential, few opportunities for skill development, and no mentorship from adult coworkers or supervisors. In addition, critics have argued that most youth work in age-segregated jobs with their peers. Such jobs may encourage workplace misconduct, foster negative attitudes toward work, and increase the potential for other problem behaviors.⁷

In addition, scholars have argued that youth employment takes time away from other activities that are developmentally beneficial,⁸ such as school work, sports participation, and other extracurricular activities.⁹ However, substantial research challenges the view that paid work takes away time from other activities, suggesting instead that paid work can have positive developmental effects. Most teenagers engage in multiple activities during their out-of-school time. For instance, one common pattern observed during the high school years is youth combining work with other activities.¹⁰ To illustrate this pattern among contemporary youth, we use data from a nationally representative sample of high school seniors in 2010 (Monitoring the Future).¹¹ Following previous research, we divide the sample into *moderate workers* (who work less than 20 hours a week during the school year), *intensive workers* (who work more than twenty hours), and *non-workers* (who average zero hours of work). We examine how these groups differ in their leisure and school-related activities.

As Table 1 demonstrates, youth often engage in a number of activities even when they are working. Our results suggest that there is not a direct trade-off between time in employment

and time in extracurricular activities. Instead, many teenagers engage in daily creative writing, arts and crafts, and music playing *regardless* of whether they work intensively, moderately, or not at all. In unlisted analyses we also found that homework time does not vary by employment. Regardless of how much teenagers work, they are equally likely to average an hour or more on homework on a given school day. This suggests that time in other activities does not necessarily suffer because of youth employment. How is this possible? National estimates suggest that youth have approximately eight hours of discretionary time a day, and much of this time is devoted to unstructured leisure.¹² *Default* leisure activities such as TV viewing, which occur when youth have nothing better to do, may be impacted by youth employment (see Table 1). Thus, the large quantity of free time is likely the reason that paid work does not crowd out developmentally beneficial extracurricular activities.

It is also possible that this pattern of involvement may occur because adolescents save time for activities that they enjoy. If teenagers love a particular activity, then they may make an effort to continue engaging in the activity regardless of whether they are working. Unfortunately, not all extracurricular activities can be easily combined with employment. Consider sports participation. Our findings suggest that intensive workers are less likely to participate in sports than youth who work fewer hours or not at all. This difference may result from the fact that sports participation usually has set practices in which all team members must participate. Moderate workers may be able to successfully balance school sports and employment (by working mostly on the weekends, for instance). However, this may not be an option for intensive workers, as other research has shown.¹³ Taken as a whole, our results suggest that youth of varying work intensities often have similar participation in extracurricular activities. When differences do arise - as in the case of sports participation - it is the intensive workers that stand out from the other groups.

Research also demonstrates that many teenage jobs are enjoyable, promote positive development, and have career potential. Many teenage jobs are not “dead-end” jobs, but instead provide opportunities for skill development, advancement, and interaction and mentorship with adults.¹⁴ These jobs may not only provide youth with important occupation-specific skills, they may also foster the development of ‘soft’ skills such as dependability, reliability, and punctuality. In addition, good jobs improve future employment prospects by helping youth develop a network of coworkers that can aid in navigating employment opportunities and serve as references. Consistent with this more positive view, most teenagers and parents hold favorable opinions toward teenage employment. Youth enjoy working, and parents believe that early workplace experiences can provide their children with a number of important skills.¹⁵

The benefits of teenage employment may be especially important to youth from lower socioeconomic status (SES). Compared to their more advantaged counterparts, youth from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to report that their high school job is teaching them useful skills and will lead into a career.¹⁶ Given that youth from low SES families are also more likely to disengage from school, early work experiences may be an especially salient context for career development for these youth.¹⁷

Youth Work and the Great Recession

In light of the potential benefits of teenage employment, understanding current employment trends is crucial. Employment trends help to identify which youth are employed and unemployed, enabling practitioners and policymakers to target career-related programming to the most ‘at-risk’ youth. An analysis of recent trends suggests that the late 2000s were an especially difficult time for youth in the US. This time period became known as the ‘Great Recession’ - and it was particularly severe for certain populations, such as young people.

Teenagers often lack education and experience, making them less desirable employees than older workers. Thus, youth are often the 'first to be fired and last to be hired.' Indeed, the unemployment rate of teenagers in 2010 was almost three times higher than that of the general population.¹⁸ This high unemployment rate paints a somber picture, suggesting that despite a strong desire to work among young people, many still struggled to secure employment. The situation was especially dire for Black and Hispanic youth who are severely disadvantaged in the labor market. For instance, in 2010, a whopping 43% of Black teenagers were unemployed, compared to 23% of White teenagers.¹⁹

Analyses from Monitoring the Future further document the dismal employment situation during the late 2000s. For instance, between 2005 and 2010, the number of youth who worked intensively decreased by 9.2 percentage points. In addition, there was dramatic increase in the percentage of youth reporting zero hours of work during the school year (from 28.2% in 2005 to 41% in 2010).²⁰ These findings suggest that the recession impacted the daily lives of teenagers by reducing the percentage of youth who were employed as well as reducing the number of hours worked.

Implications for Researchers and Practitioners

The previous discussion highlights a number of important points that should be kept in mind when working with or conducting research on adolescents. First, career programming efforts should encourage and help facilitate youth employment, especially in light of the difficulty youth are having finding jobs due to the economic downturn. These efforts should be targeted to youth of lower SES and racial minorities given the high rates of unemployment among these groups. Additionally, research suggests that employment does not necessarily crowd-out other activities; youth can successfully participate in both types of activities. Though there are some downsides to spending long hours on the job, youth work is likely more beneficial than a drawback.

Even though we encourage youth employment, practitioners must nevertheless be cognizant of the many demands on youth's time. For instance, implementing flexible attendance policies would be one solution that might help youth balance multiple obligations to work and school. In addition, given the many activities occurring during the weekdays and during the school year, practitioners might consider how weekend days and summertime could be utilized as a time for both employment and career-related programming efforts.²¹

Another important consideration relates to the context of work and whether it is 'good' for development. The consequences of teenage work (like other out-of-school contexts) depend on a number of factors related to the quality of the work setting including what kind of work the youth is doing, what skills he or she is learning, and with whom he or she is working. Youth who find and maintain *good jobs* as teenagers can learn many important skills. Indeed, many of the skills that we hope youth learn during career programming - such as skills necessary for the 21st century workforce (teamwork, communication, problem solving) or occupation-specific skills -- are often learned through paid work. Policy-makers should continue supporting the paid work experiences of disadvantaged youth, as these experiences can expose youth to the world of work and the skills required to succeed in this increasingly complex world.

Finally, career programming efforts should help youth reflect on, and learn from, their work experiences. What did they like about the job? Would they like to stay in this job in the future? What skills (both job-specific and generalizable) did they acquire from it? How did they deal with employment stressors? What techniques did they use to balance work with other life domains such as school and family? Efforts to encourage youth employment and

to help teenagers learn from these early experiences in the workplace will help them better prepare for future careers.

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Table 1

Percentage of High School Seniors Engaging in Various Activities Everyday by Paid Work Intensity

	Not Employed	Moderate Workers (1–20 hrs per week)	Intensive Workers (21 or more hrs per week)
Play a musical instrument	35%	35%	31%
Arts and Crafts	14%	14%	14%
Read for leisure	28%	24%	22%
Creative writing	10%	7%	7%
Play Sports	43%	46%	38%
Watch TV	68%	64%	58%

Source: Authors' calculations from the 2010 Monitoring the Future Study.