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The teen job crisis

By Andrew Sum and Don Gillis | March 13, 2008

IN THE 1990s many young people worked both year-round and seasonally in communities across Massachusetts - in construction, retail, finance, parks and playgrounds, and community centers. Today, however, the level of national joblessness for teens is greater than at any time over the past 60 years, and this summer will produce a new record unemployment rate unless we take action now.

The collapse of the teen labor market has affected all demographic and socioeconomic groups. There are, however, large gaps in teen employment rates across race-ethnic and income groups. During an average month in 2007 only 20 percent of black teens across the nation had jobs versus 30 percent of Hispanics and 40 percent of white non-Hispanics.

The teen job market in Massachusetts has also collapsed since the late 1990s. Despite modest growth in overall payroll employment, the state's teen employment rate last year was only 38 percent, a 30-year low. The state is no longer a national leader in the employment of teens, whether in school or out of school.

There are many reasons to care about rising youth joblessness. Path dependency is strong in teen employment behavior. The more teens work this year, the more they work next year. Less work experience today leads to less work experience tomorrow and lower earnings down the road. Disadvantaged teens who work in high school are more likely to remain in high school than their peers who do not work. Teens who work more in high school have an easier transition into the labor market after graduation. National evidence shows that pregnancy rates for teens are lower in metropolitan areas where female teen employment rates are higher.

Congress had an opportunity to boost teen and young adult employment this year when it passed a fiscal stimulus package to boost consumer spending. Yet despite efforts led by Senator Edward Kennedy and evidence that job creation programs have been found to be most effective in creating net new jobs for teens, particularly low-income teens, the White House and the congressional leadership killed the proposal to add \$1 billion to create jobs for teens and unemployed young adults.

There are a variety of workforce development strategies that can be pursued to boost teen employment opportunities this year.

First, the summer youth employment program funded by Congress for the past 35 years to create jobs in the nonprofit and public sectors, should be reinstated with an appropriation of at least \$1.5 billion. Funds also could be used by state and local Workforce Investment Boards to subsidize jobs for teens in the private-for-profit sector.

Second, the existing network of One-Stop Career Centers should be assigned a priority to recruit and place teens in jobs.

Third, recent efforts by the Patrick administration to create year-round jobs for youth should be expanded in every region of the Commonwealth and supported by the Legislature.

Fourth, state funding for School to Career Connecting Activities programs that support local workforce boards to develop year-round and summer intern jobs for high school teens should be expanded to boost access to a wider variety of jobs in the state's economy.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics preliminary payroll numbers for February are down 63,000 jobs from the previous month. The governor must provide leadership to engage Congress, the business community, and

elected officials to follow the lead of Boston, where Mayor Thomas Menino has aggressively recruited jobs for teens in private sector firms. Young people are leaving Massachusetts in record numbers. The state needs to make youth joblessness a priority in order to keep them here.

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