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Even Worse for Teens

President-elect Barack Obama and his fellow Democrats are wisely considering the kinds of public works projects that resuscitated the economy during the Depression by putting millions of unemployed Americans back to work.

Any plan must include a carefully thought out provision for youthful workers, who were being driven from the labor market in record numbers long before the financial meltdown and who now risk being permanently marginalized both socially and economically.

The part-time jobs that American teenagers once took for granted — but that millions can no longer find — provided a lot more than pocket money. Young people also learned basic workplace skills and developed work histories that made them attractive to future employers.

Young people who fail to find early jobs are more likely to remain underemployed or unemployed into their 20s and beyond. The risks are compounded for low-income youth, who are more likely to leave school and have other problems when they do not find work.

According to a recent analysis by Andrew Sum, an economist at Northeastern University, the percentage of teens employed has fallen from nearly 45 percent in 2000 to about 30 percent today. That is almost 10 times the decrease for adult workers, who are increasingly taking jobs that once went to teenagers.

The situation is far worse in low-income minority areas, where the youth employment rate appears to be hovering not much above 10 percent. That will only get worse as the economy contracts. And even when the recession ends, it could take an additional two or three years before youth employment begins to recover.

The states cannot address this problem without federal help. Congress needs to reinstate the federal summer jobs program that it abandoned in 2000, when it was thought that a strong economy made it unnecessary. It should also recreate other programs that provided subsidized jobs for young people in both the public and private sector. The country cannot allow a generation of young people to fall out of the economy.

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