When You're Unemployed and Underage

The summer job market for teens has been tough for so long that few people under 25 can remember a good year.

The last time summer jobs were easy to snare for adolescents—a decade ago—today's teenagers were still in elementary school. And the gloomy trend may get worse. The proportion of 16- to 19-year-olds landing summer jobs this year is expected to slip below last summer's record-low of 28.5%, says Andrew Sum, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University; that compares with 45% in 2000. The Economic Policy Institute says one million teens have simply left the labor force—they're neither working nor looking for work—since the recession began, an unprecedented number.

Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal

Jennifer Martinez, 18, of New York City, center, landed a summer job at McDonald's last year, and continues to work there part-time to pay college costs.

Therein lies a huge risk for today's youth. Holding down a job, or volunteer work that replicates the demands of employment, can be an important growing-up experience, lending self-confidence, responsibility and basic job skills, teen-development experts say.

But several damaging myths about teen summer jobs have taken root in the sour soil of recession. Before you let your teenager sit out the summer-job market, make sure none of these false notions is at work:

• It's not worth trying. In a talk to 33 California teens last November, Renee Ward, founder of Teens4Hire.org, a job site for adolescents, says most had an attitude that "there are no jobs and nobody's hiring." But none of the teens in the group had even tried, she says. "They're just hearing it in the media and among their friends."

Kids get jobs in a recession the same way jobless adults do—by trying, trying, and then trying again. Early in 2009, Spencer Dickerson-Carey, then 16, started applying for summer jobs, contacting more than 100 employers; he got two callbacks, both rejections. Finally, last July, the Long Beach, Calif., teen landed a part-time position selling skin-care products at a mall kiosk, where he made enough money to buy an old car. "Hopefully this summer, I'll be able to get a better job because I already have sales experience," he says. His advice to job-seeking teens: "Don't stop looking."

Among the best places to look, Ms. Ward says, are government-run youth programs; resorts and vacation spots; camps and amusement parks; child- and elder-care providers; moving, packing and lawn-care companies; movie theaters, restaurants, and clothing or accessory stores. "Don't buy into the idea that nobody is going to hire a teenager, because some will," she says. "Show your enthusiasm, your ambition and your drive."

Spencer Dickerson-Carey, 17, applied at 100 different employers before landing a summer job last year. Throughout the year, he donates his spare time to California Families in Focus, a nonprofit. Here he works alongside the group's founder, Maria Angel Macias.
Summer jobs won't help you get into college. Too many teens and their parents assume a carefully assembled montage of bought-and-paid-for camps or overseas service trips will be their admission ticket to a competitive college. In fact, Seth Allen, immediate past president of The Common Application, a group of 400 colleges and universities that use a standardized undergraduate application form, regards this as a widespread misconception, "that getting a paid job isn't nearly as valuable an experience as going to a physics boot camp or building homes for the less fortunate on a Caribbean island."

At many colleges, admissions officers' regard for such elaborate camps or group service trips, vs. earning a regular paycheck, "has flipped a bit. Students who work may stand out more" in a big applicant pool, says Mr. Allen, who is also dean of admission and financial aid at Grinnell College in Iowa. Paid jobs can provide the training and context teens need "to connect the education they will have in college to the real world," he says. If a teen can't find a paying job, serving "as the low person on the totem pole" as a volunteer with assigned duties and a regular work schedule at a nonprofit organization can deliver comparable experience. Finding a volunteer job as a teenager may take some work, but many organizations accept volunteers as young as 16, says Erin Bamhart of Idealist.org, a nonprofit that posts volunteer and internship opportunities on-line. Among them: some chapters of Habitat for Humanity, the American Cancer Society and the American Red Cross. Some teens are finding volunteer work helping nonprofits with social networking or Web marketing efforts, says a spokesman for VolunteerMatch.org, another Web site that posts volunteer opportunities.

Flipping burgers is beneath me. Many adolescents dismiss fast-food jobs as un-cool. But teens can learn a lot in a summer behind the fast-food counter. Yum! Brands' 5,600 U.S. Taco Bell restaurants, for example, train teens as young as 16 in customer service, production skills and teamwork. Shawn Boyer, chief executive of SnagAJob.com, a Web site posting hourly jobs, says, "Having that kind of job on your resume is not a knock," because such jobs entail real work, not just serving as a go-fer. He adds, "You can get firsthand experience interacting with customers," and opportunities to get promoted as well. On a job last summer at a McDonald's restaurant in Manhattan, Jennifer Martinez, 18, of New York City, discovered she likes customer service, she says, adding, "you're not going to get bored" meeting the public. She has advanced to a training position, in addition to serving as a cashier, and continues to work part-time while attending college. "I don't understand why people don't want to work in fast-food places," she says. She is learning the same customer-service, teamwork and time-management skills as required by any retail job, she adds.

The paper route is out. It is true that kids aren't peddling newspapers door-to-door any more. But selling needed services to neighbors still works. Although they aren't on an employer's payroll, many kids still learn accountability, initiative and responsibility by selling their window-washing, trash-picking, housecleaning, lawn-mowing, baby sitting or other services.

At age 11, Jeremy Furchtgott, Chevy Chase, Md., started a snow-shoveling business with help from his three younger brothers, earning from $15 to $100 per driveway on school snow days. That expanded to doing yard work for neighbors in the summer. By age 16, he started another business buying used bikes, fixing them up and selling them. Even while offering customers bargain prices, he still earned a hefty profit, splitting the proceeds with charity, says Mr. Furchtgott, now 18.

All teen work is unskilled labor. Many teens think of career skills as something they will get in college or thereafter. But plenty of teens make money applying high-tech know-how. William McRaney, 18, has a business converting home videos to DVDs on his laptop. The Midland, Texas, teenager spends up to 20 hours a week working for clients during the summers. His profit has enabled him to buy a television and a new computer, and to pay half the cost of his car, a 2005 Yukon. (His parents paid the other half.) The biggest challenge, he says, is holding down sales volume during the school year. "I have to tell a lot of people no," he says. —E-mail sue.sellenbarger@wsj.com.