

The youngest workers: 14- and 15-year-olds

Despite child labor and school attendance laws, approximately 1.6 million young teens held jobs in 1979; the labor force participation rate of girls is fast approaching that of boys, although the latter are employed in more varied occupations

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The prevailing image of a teenager, especially those in their early teen years, is of someone whose major activity is attending school. And among 14- and 15-year-olds, 98 percent do so. In addition to their attendance at school, about one-fifth of those in this age bracket were also employed or looking for work in 1979. Because of their relatively low labor force participation levels and the fact that the labor force patterns for these young workers differ markedly from those of older workers, they are currently excluded from the official monthly statistics on employment and unemployment, though separate data on their status have continued to be collected on a monthly basis.¹

Exclusion from official statistics

When the current labor force concepts were first introduced in 1940, the lower age bound was set at 14 years. In 1962, the Gordon Committee, a presidentially appointed body set up to appraise the Government's labor force statistics system, considered raising the lower age bound from 14 to 16 years but finally recommended that it be left at 14. It reasoned that the exclusion of 14- and 15-year-olds from the official labor force figures would have no significant effect on the overall data and that many of the existing historical labor force series could not easily be revised to exclude those 14 and 15

years old, with the result that there would be a break in the continuity of many existing series.² The committee's recommendation notwithstanding, labor force data pertaining to 14- and 15-year-olds were removed from the official figures in 1967 as part of an overall modification of labor force definitions. The concluding rationale was that employed youngsters 14 to 15 years old worked mainly as part-time paper carriers, babysitters, and so forth; they were bound by statute to attend school; and that they were barred from most occupations under Federal and State child labor laws. It was believed that unemployment in this age group had little significance in relation to broad economic or social accounting and that their inclusion created minor problems of interpretation and led to some unnecessary criticism of the official figures.³ Because 14- and 15-year-olds accounted for only about 1.6 percent of the civilian labor force, their exclusion from the monthly employment data has made no noticeable difference in the overall unemployment rate. For example, the overall annual average unemployment rate was 5.8 percent in 1979 and would have been only a tenth of a percentage point higher with the inclusion of these very young workers. (See table 1.)

Any analysis of the labor market situation of 14- and 15-year-olds must recognize the impact of child labor and school attendance laws. The Federal Fair Labor Standards Act is the major statute in the child labor field. Under the law, 14- and 15-year-olds may not be employed in any manufacturing occupation, processing

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Table 1. Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population by age, 1979 annual averages
[In thousands]

Employment status	14 and 15 years old	16 years and over	14 years and over
Civilian noninstitutional population . . .	7,925	161,532	169,457
Civilian labor force	1,622	102,908	104,530
Participation rate	20.7	63.7	61.7
Employed	1,372	96,945	98,317
Unemployed	250	5,963	6,213
Unemployment rate	15.4	5.8	5.9
Not in the labor force	6,302	58,623	64,925

occupations (such as laundering or dressing poultry), or any other occupation or worksite found to be hazardous by the Secretary of Labor.⁴ In addition, every State has a child labor law; whenever a State standard differs from a Federal standard, the more restrictive one must be observed.⁵

In most States, children from the ages of 7 to 16 are required to attend school, thereby severely restricting the days and hours a student is available for work. In addition, 14- and 15-year-olds cannot work more than 40 hours per week nor more than 8 hours per day when school is out. When school is in session, daily working hours are limited to 3 and weekly hours to 18. Also, night work, which the Federal Government defines as working between the hours of 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., is prohibited during the school year; during the summer months, working hours are extended until 9 p.m.⁶

Labor force activity increases

Among these workers, labor force participation rates—the ratio of those employed or unemployed to the noninstitutional population—indicate that individuals in this age group are somewhat more active than in the past. Interestingly, as shown in the following tabulation, this increased labor market activity has come about because of a rising participation rate among girls which is rapidly approaching that for boys. Participation for the latter has declined slightly over the last 25 years:

	Total	Boys	Girls
1954	18.1	24.7	11.3
1959	18.7	24.3	12.9
1969	18.5	22.0	14.9
1979	20.7	22.2	18.7

As is well known, the participation rate of teenagers increases dramatically with age. In 1979, the participation rate for 14- and 15-year-olds was 20.7 percent, 48.7 percent among 16- to 17-year-olds, and 67.4 percent for 18- and 19-year-olds.

Differences in participation associated with race are of particular interest. The participation rate is noticeably lower among young black teenagers than among

whites, probably because of the much greater difficulty they face in finding part-time jobs.⁷ During the school year, white 14- and 15-year-olds are about three times as likely as their black counterparts to be in the labor force; in the summer months, however, proportionately more black youth enter the labor force and, as a result, the ratio of white-to-black labor force participation among these young workers declines to about 1.5 to 1. (See chart 1.)

Any appraisal of the determinants of 14- and 15-year-old participation in the labor force is greatly affected by the fact that the vast majority of them are in school. Only 2 percent, or 148,000, of the 7.7 million teenagers aged 14 to 15 years were not enrolled in school in October 1979.

To obtain a fuller picture of the relationship between age and the amount of labor supplied by 14- and 15-year-olds enrolled in school, it is useful to take into account the variations in hours worked by those who are employed. In October 1979, of those enrolled in school and employed in nonagricultural industries, almost four-fifths worked only 1 to 14 hours weekly and virtually all worked 21 hours or less. (See table 2.) As expected, this pattern of short hours worked by students declines with age. Among 16- and 17-year-olds enrolled in school, 77 percent worked 21 hours or less; the proportion dropped to 63 percent among 18- and 19-year-olds and 45 percent for those 20 to 24 years old. Among those young teenagers engaged in agricultural employment, the number of hours worked per week was greater. Only two-fifths of the teenagers

Table 2. Hours of work of 14- and 15-year-olds enrolled in school, by type of industry and sex, October 1979
[In thousands]

Characteristic	Total	Boys	Girls
Total enrolled in school ¹	1,174	652	522
Agriculture	136	115	21
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0
1-14 hours	39.0	39.1	38.1
15-21 hours	36.8	35.7	42.9
22-34 hours	16.2	17.4	9.5
35-39 hours	1.5	.9	4.8
40 hours	1.5	1.7	(²)
41 hours and over	5.1	5.2	4.8
Nonagricultural industries	1,041	538	503
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0
1-14 hours	78.1	74.9	81.5
15-21 hours	15.7	18.4	12.7
22-34 hours	5.5	6.3	4.6
35-39 hours . . . . .	.2	(²)	.4
40 hours . . . . .	.4	.3	.4
41 hours and over . . . . .	.2	(²)	.4

¹ These statistics are based on replies to the enumerator's inquiry as to whether the person was enrolled in school. Enumerators are instructed to include anyone who has been enrolled at any time during the current term or school year in day or night school in a public, parochial, or other private school. Such schools include elementary schools, junior or senior high schools, and colleges or universities. Excluded are persons enrolled in special schools, such as trade schools or business colleges; persons enrolled in classes which do not require physical presence in school, such as correspondence courses; and those in on-the-job training courses.

² Less than 0.1 percent.

worked 1 to 14 hours, another two-fifths worked 15 to 21 hours, and almost one-fifth worked 22 to 34 hours. In both agricultural and nonagricultural industries, however, the majority of young persons worked 21 hours or less. Thus, virtually all 14- and 15-year-olds, 93 percent, were working part time.

Employment opportunities limited

Occupations. In general, 14- and 15-year-olds are extremely limited in the occupations they can choose. Most white-collar jobs require more education and technical expertise than these young workers would have been able to acquire, and many blue-collar jobs are off limits because hazardous equipment is used at the worksite. Most jobs open to them fall into three categories: (1) sales work, (2) service work, and (3) unskilled labor. Three-fourths of all young teenage girls are in service occupations, the majority as private household workers (babysitters in particular). As shown in table 3, 14- and 15-year-old boys have more varied occupations; one-fourth are engaged in sales (for example, newspaper deliverers, cashiers, salespersons), another one-fourth are nonfarm laborers (such as, stock handlers, carwash attendants, yard workers), and nearly another fourth are service workers (for example, child-

care workers, dishwashers, fast-food workers, cleaning service workers).

Industries. Likewise, many industries are closed to 14- and 15-year-old youth. Manufacturing employment in particular and the operation of power-driven machinery are often prohibited. In addition, occupations are limited in connection with transportation, public utilities, construction, and warehousing. What this amounts to is that these youth are restricted to relatively casual, day-time employment, usually within the service and retail trade industries.

Fewer hired. The unemployment rate of 14- and 15-year-olds, at 15.4 percent in 1979, was well above the overall average of 5.8 percent for persons of "official" labor force age. Given the legal constraints and requirements under which they must operate, it is not surprising that employment opportunities for the youngest workers are extremely limited. But whether employers would hire significantly more 14- and 15-year-olds if the laws were relaxed is unknown.⁸ State and Federal laws are not the only factors to consider when studying youth unemployment. Older teenagers also have significantly high levels of unemployment: 16.1

Chart 1. Ratio of white to black labor force participation rates for youth 14 and 15 years old, January-December 1979

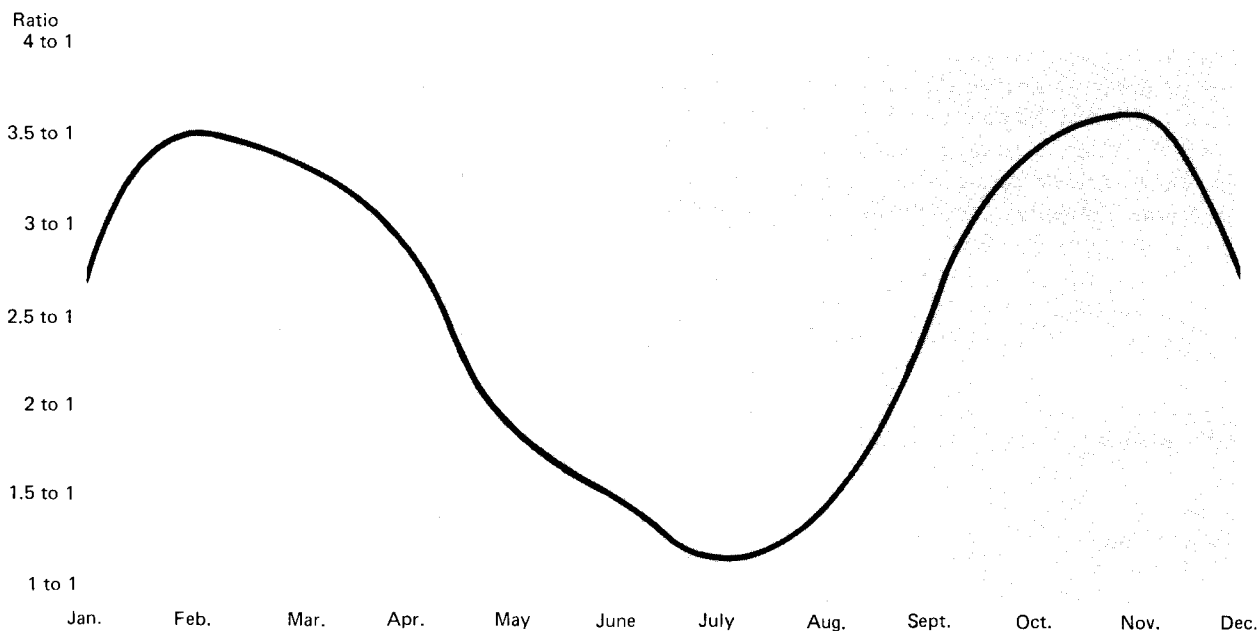


Table 3. Occupation of 14- and 15-year-old boys and girls enrolled in school, by sex, October 1979

[In thousands]

Occupation	Total	Boys	Girls
Total enrolled in school ¹ . . .	1,206	669	537
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0
White-collar workers	24.1	28.9	18.2
Professional and technical	1.2	1.0	1.3
Managers and administrators	(²)	(²)	(²)
Sales	17.7	24.7	9.1
Clerical	5.2	3.1	7.8
Blue-collar workers	18.2	30.0	3.4
Craft and kindred . . . . .	.7	1.2	(²)
Operatives, except transport	3.1	4.3	1.5
Transport equipment operatives . . . . .	.2	.3	(²)
Nonfarm laborers	14.3	24.2	1.9
Service workers	48.6	27.7	74.7
Private household	27.9	5.2	56.1
Other	20.7	22.5	18.6
Farmworkers	9.1	13.5	3.7
Managers . . . . .	.2	.3	(²)
Laborers	8.9	13.2	3.7

¹ See table 2, footnote 1.² See table 2, footnote 2.

percent for 16- and 17-year-olds in 1979, 14.6 percent for 18- and 19-year-olds. Employment for 16- and 17-year-olds is limited only by orders declaring certain situations to be particularly hazardous or detrimental to one's health; and for those 18 years and over, child labor laws cease to apply. Obviously, these older teenagers have other problems which must be taken into account, principally their lack of work experience, inadequate entry skills, and intermittent attachment to the labor market.

The jobless rate of 14- and 15-year-olds differs markedly by race and sex. Unemployment among young black 14- and 15-year-old girls was nearly 50 percent in 1979, the highest of any age-sex-race group measured. In contrast, 14- and 15-year-old white girls had an unemployment rate of 11 percent, approaching a fifth that of their black counterparts. The following tabulation shows the unemployment rates of 14- and 15-year-old workers, 1979 annual averages:

	<i>Unemployment rate</i>
All workers	15.4
Boys	16.6
White	14.2
Black and other	39.8
Girls	14.0
White	11.0
Black and other	48.3

Despite the high incidence of unemployment, the length of time these young teenagers remain unemployed tends to be brief—the average (mean) being 6 weeks in 1979 for both white and black youth. Three-fifths of all who experienced unemployment had less than 5 weeks of it during the year, largely reflecting the

seasonal or intermittent nature of their labor force participation.

There are also some other mitigating factors regarding unemployment among 14- and 15-year-olds. Virtually all are in school and seeking only part-time work; and, for the most part, finding employment is not an economic necessity, as the vast majority live with their parents. However, experiencing unemployment at this young age may have negative effects for some; it is possible that those who are consistently blocked in their attempts to find work will eventually perceive that the labor market is unlikely to provide them with a "good" job in the future. Hence, some may have a psychological disadvantage in terms of motivation and attitude in their later job search.

Most dropouts not in labor force

Given the current laws and regulations affecting 14- and 15-year-olds, formal educational requirements preempt most of the usual workday time of young people, and the Fair Labor Standards Act restricts the potential area of employment into their late teens. The act was legislated to protect the youngest members of our society from exploitation and hazardous job assignments. It was designed to limit employment abuses and allow for the gradual integration of teenagers into the labor market—not to restrict relevant employment opportunity. However, some still argue that these laws unfairly restrict the job market potential of those who do not want to or cannot finish school by denying them the chance to begin training in a trade that would provide them with solid job opportunities in the future.⁹

Though specific data are meager, there were roughly 150,000 teenagers age 14 and 15 years who were not enrolled in school during October 1979. Of these, only 37,000, or 25 percent, were in the labor force. Thus, more than 100,000 14- and 15-year-olds were neither attending a regular academic school, employed, nor looking for work. Information on why these youth are neither in school nor pursuing a job is sparse. Some are likely too discouraged to look because they believe they are too young to be hired, lack needed skills or training, or simply think there are no jobs available to them in their community. Others may have unsuccessfully looked for work in the past and have given up the search. Some youngsters are not enrolled in school because of what can broadly be termed "health problems" (for example, ill health, mental infirmities, the strain of academic work, or related emotional problems); and such people are not as likely to be in the labor force as persons who have left school for other reasons. It has been advanced that a sizable number of 14- and 15-year-olds who are not in school fall into this category, but that past age 15 this reason for nonenrollment declines markedly.¹⁰

Still some of the 14- and 15-year-olds not enrolled in a regular academic school are receiving vocational instruction in automobile mechanics, cosmetology, electronics, and other fields. In October 1979, one-third of all 14- and 15-year-old boys and one-sixth of all girls were learning trades at a special school.

GENERALLY, PROBLEMS relating to 14- and 15-year-olds in the labor force have focused on Federal and State regulations which were designed to afford young workers special protection from exposure to industrial hazards and enforce compulsory school attendance. Analysis of data suggest that, in addition to their in-

tended purpose, child labor laws affect the range of employment choices open to school leavers as well as students and also have the more positive effect of discouraging some youth from dropping out of high school by creating adverse constraints in the labor market. Thus, the level of employment and incidence of unemployment among these young workers is probably more directly related to mandatory school attendance laws, statutes restricting employment, and their actual job desires than to other areas of concern such as lack of experience and low skill level. The latter generally afflict older teenagers who are often seeking more permanent and responsible jobs. □

— FOOTNOTES —

¹ Separate data on the employment status and related characteristics for this group are published monthly in the BLS publication, *Employment and Earnings*.

² President's Committee to Appraise Employment and Unemployment Statistics, *Measuring Employment and Unemployment* (Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), p. 43.

³ Robert L. Stein, "New Definitions for Employment and Unemployment," *Employment and Earnings*, February 1967, p. 3.

⁴ For a complete listing of those occupations in which 14- and 15-year-olds are restricted, see *A Guide to Child Labor Provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act*, Child Labor Bulletin 101 (U.S. Department of Labor, Employment Standards Administration, 1973), pp. 5-7 and 30-33.

⁵ In structure, State laws are not much different from the Fair Labor Standards Act; most cover six basic elements: minimum ages for employment, requirements for work permits; daily and weekly hour limitations; restraints on nightwork; school attendance requirements; and special restrictions for hazardous occupations. It is difficult to characterize any one State law as being more or less restrictive than the Federal standard given the many areas for comparison. For a de-

tailed analysis of State child labor standards affecting minors under age 18, see Richard R. Nelson, "Labor Legislation: 1978-79," *The Book of the States, 1980-81* (Lexington, Ky., The Council of State Governments, 1980) pp. 559-575.

⁶ *Guide to Child Labor Provisions*, p. 30. (Child Labor Regulations No. 3 is currently undergoing scrutiny with the likelihood that the child labor provisions will undergo some changes if approved by the Secretary of Labor.)

⁷ William G. Bowen and T. Aldrich Finegan, *The Economics of Labor Force Participation* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 403-04.

⁸ Daniel J. B. Mitchell and John Clapp, *Legal Constraints on Teenage Employment: A New Look at Child Labor and School Leaving Laws* (Los Angeles, University of California Institute of Industrial Relations, 1979).

⁹ Mitchell and Clapp, *Legal Constraints*, and National Manpower Institute, "Youth Employment and the Law" (National Committee on Employment of Youth, 1975).

¹⁰ Bowen and Finegan, *Economics of Labor*, pp. 409 and 415.