



## URBAN AFFAIRS

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# Occupying Idle Teen Hands

## Cities are fighting the highest youth unemployment in decades

**By Bret Schulte**

The first few months of 2008 brought a bloody wave of violence to Brockton, Mass., a city of about 100,000 just south of Boston. Officials noted a surge in gang activity among young people just as the economy had begun to struggle.

In March, city leaders hatched a plan. Volunteers gathered to dial up local employers and ask them to hire young people for the summer. "To give them a few pennies in their pockets and keep them off the streets, hopefully," says organizer Sheila Sullivan-Jardim of the Brockton Area Workforce Investment Board. In return, civic groups pledged to teach the teens basic work etiquette and skills. In six hours, the telethon had secured pledges for 110 jobs, including 15 for the Brockton Rox baseball team. Fifty-five more soon followed.

Those 165 jobs may not seem like much, but cities like Brockton are desperate to occupy as many teens as possible in a summer shaping up to have the worst youth employment rate on record. The Center for Labor Market Studies of Northeastern University forecasts that summer teen employment will not rise above 34 percent. That's the worst jobless rate for teens in the past 61 years.

The problem is partly due to the weakening of a federal summer jobs program but also to immigrants competing for low-skill jobs, retirees and seniors re-entering the workforce, and a recent eco-

nomie slump that has more experienced workers fighting for downscale jobs. "A lot of kids are locked out of working at McDonald's and Dunkin' Donuts," says Joseph McLaughlin of the Center for Labor Market Studies.

Cities across the country are trying to ward off the troubles attendant with bored teens and boiling temperatures. They may include crime, teen pregnancy, and a poor work ethic that feeds into lifelong

VAL CANEZ--TUSCON CITIZEN/AP



A teen working at an ice cream shop.

poverty. Though research hasn't shown conclusively that summer work dampens crime, policymakers swear by it. "Nothing stops a bullet like a job," says Larry Frank, a deputy to Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

Since 2005, Villaraigosa has doubled the city's funding for summer job programs, increasing jobs from 3,000 to 10,000. Many struggling students get jobs if they promise to work toward a diploma. The city also prepares kids for the private sector, which the mayor has pushed to provide 15,000 summer

jobs. Still, the city faces a massive gang problem, and schools are turning away from year-round classes, adding 5,000 kids to the streets this summer. "We're doing what we can do," Frank says. "The number of kids that need to work is far beyond our capacity."

In Cincinnati, Mayor Mark Mallory has been pouring millions into summer job fairs. This year's fair in April brought together 125 employers with 2,500 applicants, but Mallory couldn't say how many jobs it generated. "Many employers don't want to hire teenagers because they don't have the job skills, and teenagers don't have the job skills because nobody is willing to hire them."

Inner-city churches in Baltimore donated \$60,000 to the city's YouthWorks program, which fell short of placing the nearly 7,000 applicants in its jobs program. Baptist Bishop Douglas I. Miles called the program essential "if we want to turn around the drug culture of this city." Milwaukee, meanwhile, hoped to grow its summer jobs program, but it has been hindered by a shortage of federal money and private employers tightening their belts.

All this has prompted calls for more help from Washington. More than 140 mayors have signed a letter to Congress pleading for it to pass a \$1 billion authorization bill for youth activities. But the first attempt failed, and support on Capitol Hill remains scant. Mark it up as another unfilled summer job.