

NINA MOINI: The school year is wrapping up for high schoolers. Soon, some teens will put down their backpacks and pick up maybe an ice cream scoop or a lifeguard whistle. It's the season of the summer job, but this year it may be harder to find one.

In March, the teen unemployment rate was at 13.2%, that's nearly double what it was at in March of last year. This is according to data from the state. And over the past year, Minnesota also lost more than 5,000 jobs in the leisure and hospitality sector that tend to hire young people.

So joining me to explain is someone who spends a lot of time with these numbers. Oriane Casale is assistant director of the labor market information office at the Minnesota Department of employment and Economic Development, or DEED. Welcome to the program, Oriane.

ORIANE CASALE: Hi. Thank you.

NINA MOINI: Also very happy to have Billie Jo Greene with the Rural Minnesota Concentrated Employment program in Bemidji, which helps place youth ages 14 to 24, in jobs and provides other career resources as well. Thanks very much for your time, Billie.

Oriane I'd love to start with you. So the Wall Street Journal here looked at one analysis that predicted this summer could be the worst for teen employment in decades. How does that align or not with what you're seeing specific to the Minnesota data?

ORIANE CASALE: Well, that's a very good question. It turns out the COVID pandemic recession was actually really good for teen employment. Teens took a lot of the customer facing jobs that adults were unwilling to take during that period and they stuck with it. Teens stuck with it.

And it wasn't until this past year that we really saw teen unemployment rates and labor force participation rates getting back to a more normal place. So actually where they are now in 2026 is a more typical place for teens to be in the labor market relative to other workers. So at 13.3% unemployment in April and Minnesota for teens, that's actually fairly typical compared to the last 20 year, long-term perspective.

NINA MOINI: Well, good. I mean, here's the thing. There are so many nuanced factors to the last five years or so in itself and you have to look at a big picture. So I'm glad that you're seeing what you're seeing here on the ground.

It sounds like you're saying there was a little tiny peak after or during the height of the COVID pandemic, and then it just like normalizing now. But do you feel there is a perception that it's really hard right now because sometimes I feel the perception could contribute to the problem?

ORIANE CASALE: Absolutely. I mean, we are seeing the labor market beginning to get a little more difficult for everybody, and teens are certainly not an exception to that. The unemployment rate ticked up. It's now at 4.5%. It's even a little higher than the US unemployment rate.

So we're really seeing a more challenging labor market overall, and that is impacting teens too. But I do want to emphasize there are jobs out there for teens. Industries really rely on teens, especially certain industries and especially during the summer. So like food service, arts, entertainment, and recreation, retail and even agriculture all really rely on teens. Summer is peak teen employment.

NINA MOINI: Sure. And it's great to have resources aimed at making those connections sometimes for people, and Billie, I understand that that's a lot of your work. And I wonder if you're hearing from the people you're working with. Looks like ages 14 to about 24 about how they've been impacted with just surging prices for things like groceries and cost of living like everyone else. Oftentimes, we don't stop to think how that might impact a young adult or a teen.

BILLIE JO GREENE: Yes, absolutely. A great resource that Minnesota has right now is career force. We're actually hosted inside of career force. So I would encourage any family listening if they are needing school funding, maybe a mock interview, resume creation to stop into your local career force.

We're rural Minnesota CEP, so we're inside the career force in Bemidji. But yes, teens have a more difficult time just because if you think about an adult applying for the job where they have all these skills and then the teen maybe not have as many skills and they're both applying for the same job.

So that's where it's really helpful to reach out to your resources because we can help take all those skills that maybe they don't think goes on a resume. Babysitting, helping out with a local garden or a family's garden. There's so many skills that they could be putting on that resume, and they just need a little direction and doing that.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and I wonder, too, if what you're hearing from younger people that you're working with Billie about what types of jobs they find desirable or what are they looking for?

BILLIE JO GREENE: I would say a lot of them are looking into mostly retail when we're connecting with them. Some are located in nonprofits, like the food shelf. They will take teens and work in their community garden over the summer.

And sometimes, if they have no direction and they come to us, we can do some assessments to help them figure out what direction they should go, whether that be within the high school career or when they graduate and maybe they need some school funding to go to college. So anything between 14 to 24, we're here to help.

NINA MOINI: Good. Oriane, what is your advice to young people who are looking for a job this year? We don't want it to sound unnecessarily grim for people, but we want people to be having solutions and taking steps. So what would your first step be or your advice?

ORIANE CASALE: Absolutely. I like the idea of really thinking, as a teen, really thinking about what you want to do either after high school or after college, and trying to link that to the types of jobs that you're applying for as a teen. So there's all great opportunities out there.

And like I said, some industries really, really rely on teens. So in food service, 26% of employment in the summer is teens. Arts entertainment and recreation, it's about 20%, retail trade it's about 16%. Again, I mentioned AG. AG is about 11%.

So industry's really rely on teens, but teens can also really think more broadly about other types of jobs. So a couple that come to mind are personal care attendant. There are so many great opportunities out there to get experience in health care.

Child care is another one. There's been articles about companies having their workers come back, so no more virtual work. That opens up opportunities for child care all over the place, all over Minnesota.

NINA MOINI: That's good. So just being creative, thinking about what transferable skills might exist, even if you don't see it right away. But just lastly, and I wish we had more time, but we've got time for one more question here, and maybe I'll kick it to you Billie, what is your advice then on the flip side to employers who are considering teen applicants?

BILLIE JO GREENE: I would say definitely be open to job shadows, be open to hiring them because they have an open mind. They're beginning their career, so they're really going to take you on as a mentor and learn skills from that job.

NINA MOINI: And Oriane how about you? What would your advice be to employers?

ORIANE CASALE: I would say if you're trying to recruit teens, teens are so great at connecting with each other. So tell your teen workers that you're trying to find other more workers and they're going to be your best help in that.

NINA MOINI: Good advice. Thank you both so much for your time. We really appreciate both of you.

ORIANE CASALE: Thank you.

BILLIE JO GREENE: Yes, thank you very much.

NINA MOINI: Thank you. Billie Jo Greene is team leader with Bemidji's Rural Minnesota Concentrated Employment program. And Oriane Casale is assistant director of the labor market information office of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development.