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## The Young and the Jobless

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By [BOB HERBERT](#)

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There were high fives at the White House last week when the latest monthly employment report showed that 274,000 jobs had been created in April, substantially more than experts had predicted.

The employment bar has been set so low for the Bush administration that even a modest gain is cause for celebration. But we shouldn't be blinded by the flash of last Saturday's headlines. American workers, especially younger workers, remain stuck in a gloomy employment landscape.

For example, a recent report from the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston tells us that the employment rate for the nation's teenagers in the first 11 months of 2004 - just 36.3 percent - was the lowest it has ever been since the federal government began tracking teenage employment in 1948.

Those 20 to 24 years old are also faring poorly. In 2000, 72.2 percent were employed during a typical month. By

last year that percentage had dropped to 67.9 percent.

Even the recent modest surge in jobs has essentially bypassed young American workers. Gains among recently arrived immigrants seem to have accounted for the entire net increase in jobs from 2000 through 2004.

Over all, only workers 55 and up have done reasonably well over the past few years. "Younger workers," said Andrew Sum, the center's director, "have just been crushed."

Whatever the politicians and the business-booster types may be saying, the simple truth is that there are not nearly enough jobs available for the many millions of out-of-work or underworked men and women who need them. The wages of those who are employed are not even keeping up with inflation.

Workers have been so cowed by an environment in which they are so obviously dispensable that they have been afraid to ask for the raises they deserve, or for their share of the money derived from the remarkable increases in worker productivity over the past few years. And from one coast to the other, workers have swallowed draconian cuts in benefits with scarcely a whimper.

Some segments of the population have been all but completely frozen out. In Chicago, only one of every 10 black teenagers found employment in 2004. In Illinois, fewer than one in every three teenage high school dropouts are working.

Last month's increase of 274,000 jobs was barely enough to keep up with the increase in the nation's working-age population.

"The economy is growing and real output is up," said Mr. Sum, who is also a professor at Northeastern. "But the distribution of income, in terms of how much is going to workers - well, the answer is very little has gone to the typical worker."

The squeeze on the younger generation of workers is so tight that in many cases the young men and women of today are faring less well than their parents' generation did at a similar age. Professor Sum has been comparing the standard of living of contemporary families with that of comparable families three decades ago.

"Two-thirds of this generation are not living up to their parents' standard of living," he said.

College graduates today are doing better in real economic terms than college graduates in the 1970's. But everyone else is doing less well. "If you look at families headed by someone without a college degree," said Professor Sum, "their income last year in real terms was below that of a comparable family in 1973. For dropouts it's like 25 percent below where it was. And for high school grads, about 15 to 20 percent below."

It shouldn't be surprising that the standard of living of large segments of the population is sinking when employers have all the clout, including the powerful and unwavering support of the federal government. Workers can't even get a modest increase in the national minimum wage.

Globalization was supposed to be great for everyone. Nafta was supposed to be a boon. Increased productivity was supposed to be the ultimate tool - the sine qua non - for raising the standard of living for all.

Instead, wealth and power in the United States has become ever more dangerously concentrated, leaving an entire generation of essentially powerless workers largely at the mercy of employers.

A remark by Louis Brandeis comes to mind: "We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few. But we can't have both."

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