

## **American idle**

*More young people ages 19 to 21 are spinning their wheels and going nowhere fast: no school, no career. State and local experts say it's a growing challenge for communities across the nation.*

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**LANCASTER COUNTY, PA** - "Trouble springs from idleness, and grievous toil from needless ease." — Benjamin Franklin  
After graduation from high school, many students expect to attend four-year colleges.

Others plan to study radiology or nursing or computers at vocational and technical programs.

But there are those who leave high school and do nothing at all.

One in nine Lancaster County adults between 19 and 21 is not working and not enrolled in school, according to a report, "The State of Youth Employment," released this week from Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Across the state, it's one in seven.

Perhaps, these young adults are lazy. Or, maybe they just don't know what they want to do with their lives.

Or, some may work on their parents' farms and not be counted in the partnership's survey.

Whatever the reason, idleness is a growing problem for young adults across the nation, the report says.

"While we've been enjoying some recovery in our economy, we find ourselves in a position where our youth aren't sharing in the declining unemployment rates," says Joan Benso, president and chief executive officer of PPC, an advocacy group in Harrisburg.

The PPC based the data in the report on an analysis of 2000 U.S. Census Bureau statistics and Current Population Surveys from 1996-2004.

The nation's average employment rate for all employable teens fell to 36 percent last year, according to the report.

There are several reasons for the trend.

Benso says that young people today must compete against retired workers and recent college graduates who can't find a job in their desired field. And some lack focus.

Scott Sheely, the executive director of the Lancaster County Workforce Investment Board, recognizes that there is a problem.

WIB's research has revealed that young adults are often in their mid to late 20s before they land their first "real" job with benefits.

But he thinks the county's unemployment numbers for teens are lower. WIB works with school districts and local colleges and businesses to prepare students for the work place.

Still, there are teens who struggle to find their way.

"We know there is a situation where there are a lot of kids who get encouraged to go to college, and they drop out in the first year, and they end up back in the community," Sheely says. "It's not so much the unemployed people; it's the underemployed people."

Young adults are delivering pizza. They are assistant managers in shoe stores. They are busboys.

Sheely says that workers ages 19-21 comprise a large part of the county's hospitality work force. Many also work in retail.

And many young adults work for temporary agencies. Others work under the table.

"But it's not up to their potential," he says.

There is research that shows teens who work are more ready to face the challenges of adulthood, Benso says.

Working teaches responsibility and builds character.

Research also shows that idle teens are more likely to engage in drug use and get in trouble with the law.

To prevent these problems, teens should consider taking summer jobs, Benso says.

Fewer teens are finding summer jobs, though, and that, too, is a national

trend, according to the PPC report.

Not every teen who doesn't work in the summer sits on the couch playing video games.

Christina Faust, 18, graduated from Ephrata High this year and plans to study political science and music at Lycoming College in Williamsport.

The summer between her sophomore and junior year she cleaned cars at the Cloister Car Wash. Besides baby-sitting, that was her only job.

She's been too busy with school activities such as mock trial, yearbook and music. And she was the student school board representative.

Faust thinks some teens who don't work do not take jobs because they are already focused. They don't need "real" jobs to prepare for adult life.

"I communicate well with others, I respect my elders, and I can take constructive criticism," she says.

Not everyone is driven like Faust.

For those students, high schools need to do more, Benso says.

They should increase academic rigor and deliver information about technical schools to students early, Benso says.

And parents need to wake up and realize that not every teen is meant for the four-year university.

On that point, Sheely agrees.

"What's happened recently is that guidance counselors have gotten the message, but parents have the problems," Sheely says. "I'm 54. In my generation, going to college was a big deal."

So moms and dads shouldn't count out technical schools for their children.

"In many cases, a two-year tech degree is as valuable as a four-year degree," he says.

Most county public schools send students to the Lancaster County Career and Technology Center if they want vocational training. About 1,000 students graduated from their programs this year.

Dominic DeFilippo has led the Lancaster School District's community-based

learning program for the past five years. He retired a few months ago.

He says McCaskey High has its own vocational programs including cosmetology, early childhood education, computer-assisted drafting and law enforcement. He's seen many students go on to success through these programs.

He does agree, however, that there are some students who "lack direction and high expectations" of themselves, he says.

Could schools do more? Absolutely, he says.

Guidance counselor Jerry Wyble from Conestoga Valley High School says that his department talks to students more than 300 hours over the course of their high school life about careers and college.

For some, the message goes unheeded.

Kyle Sauder, 17, will be a junior at Ephrata High this year. He plans to study business management after he graduates.

He's worked at Subway in the Cloister Shopping Center for 11 months.

"I wanted to get stuff," he said. "I wanted to have a car."

He paid half of the price tag for his 1999 forest-green Ford Explorer. His parents paid the other half.

Sauder pays for his car insurance and cell phone bills.

Many of his friends work.

For those who don't, don't judge them too harshly.

"They are trying," he says. "A lot of kids just don't know what they want to do."