



Challenger, Gray
& Christmas

CONTACT

Colleen Madden Blumenfeld

Office: 312-422-5074

Mobile: 314-807-1568

colleenmadden@challengergray.com

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Teen Summer Hiring Set to Slow Further in 2026

AFTER A 77-YEAR LOW IN 2025, INFLATION, RISING OIL PRICES, AND CAUTIOUS EMPLOYERS POINT TO ANOTHER QUIET SUMMER FOR TEEN WORKERS

CHICAGO, May 19, 2026 – After last summer’s teen hiring total fell to the lowest level on record in nearly eight decades of BLS data, the headwinds facing teen workers have only intensified. Rising inflation, climbing oil prices, and a broadly cautious hiring environment are expected to keep the 2026 summer hiring total well below historical averages as employers and consumers rein in spending.

Global outplacement and executive coaching firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas predicts teens will gain **790,000 jobs** in May, June, and July 2026, down slightly from the 801,000 jobs employers added last summer. If realized, it would be the lowest summer hiring total for teens since BLS began tracking the data in 1948, undercutting last year’s figure.

Last summer’s 801,000 jobs was the weakest summer for teen hiring in the 77-year history of the BLS series. The prior low was 932,000 in 1949, during post-war demobilization. The previous post-1948 low came in 2010, at 960,000, during the recovery from the Great Recession.

Last summer’s total was down 25.6% from 2024’s 1,077,000 and well below Challenger’s 1 million prediction at this time last year. The dropoff was driven by an unusually weak May, when employers added just 5,000 teen jobs, and a soft June that added 615,000.

“Last summer was the weakest summer for teen hiring we have ever recorded. What is striking is that it happened without a recession. Inflation and rising fuel costs are squeezing the same households and small businesses that hire teens, such as amusement parks, restaurants, retailers, and summer camps. When margins tighten, summer hirers will wait for demand to dictate hiring,” said Andy Challenger, labor and workplace expert and chief revenue officer for Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

“We predicted a quiet summer last year, and it played out even quieter than expected. The dynamics that drove that slowdown - cost pressures, automation, employers waiting to see how consumer demand holds up - are all still in place, and in some cases they’ve intensified,” he added.

In April, **5,193,000** workers aged 16 to 19 were employed, according to non-seasonally adjusted data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). That is down from 5,487,000 employed during the same month last year and represents one of the weakest April readings since 2021. With fewer teens already on payrolls heading into the busiest hiring months, the runway for a strong summer is narrower than it has been in years.

“When fewer teens are working in April, the late-spring catch-up usually doesn’t close the gap. June will be the most important month to watch, but the trajectory is already pointing down,” said Challenger.

Why Employers Are Holding Back

Through April, U.S.-based employers announced plans to hire just 60,936 workers, down 13% from the 70,058 hiring plans announced at this point in 2025. Entertainment and Leisure, which led the seasonal categories most relevant to teen hiring last year with 28,000 announced plans, has announced only 8,261 hiring plans through April of this year, a 70% drop.

“The collapse in Entertainment and Leisure hiring announcements is one of the clearest signals we have for the summer. Theme parks, resorts, hotels, and event operators are signaling they’ll run leaner this year. That is exactly the kind of work teens depend on,” said Challenger.

Several forces are stacking up against the teen worker this summer:

Inflation and oil prices. Persistent inflation and a fresh climb in oil prices are pushing input costs higher for the restaurants, retailers, and travel operators that historically anchor teen summer hiring.

AI and automation. Many of the routine, entry-level tasks that once formed the bulk of a first job such as, order taking, basic customer service, inventory checks, and scheduling are now being automated or assisted by AI.

Older workers staying in. Workers who once would have retired in their late 50s and 60s are increasingly staying in or returning to the workforce, often for the same part-time and seasonal roles teens would have taken. Teens are competing for these jobs with a more experienced labor pool.

Competing teen priorities. In the 1970s and 1980s, teen labor force participation routinely neared or topped 50%. As of April, it was 29.5%. Teens have far more competing priorities than previous generations: club sports, structured extracurriculars, college prep, paid academic programs, internships, and content creation. Many are also choosing experiences over wages.

A Different Teen Workforce Than the 1980s

Teen labor force participation peaked at more than 50% in the late 1970s and 1980s, when a summer job at the local pool, ice cream stand, or grocery store was a near-universal rite of passage. April 2026’s data shows how much that has shifted. Today’s teens are navigating a more crowded calendar and a job market that has been reshaped by technology, demographics, and economics.

“This isn’t the teen workforce of the 1980s. Today’s 16-to-19-year-olds are balancing AP coursework, caretaking for their families, club sports that run year-round, summer enrichment programs, paid internships, and online side hustles. For many families, the calculation around a traditional summer job has changed,” said Challenger.

The result is a structurally lower participation rate and an environment where the teens who do want a traditional summer job face stiffer competition for fewer slots.

Where Opportunities May Still Open Up

Even in a muted hiring year, pockets of demand remain. Tighter labor supply in certain regions, particularly those most affected by ongoing immigration enforcement actions, continues to push some employers to lean more heavily on local teen workers. Some state legislatures have moved to ease child labor restrictions in response. While that may create more openings in agriculture, hospitality, and food service in those areas, it also raises real questions about the educational and developmental tradeoffs for young workers.

“In the places where labor remains tight, teens can be a real solution. But families should weigh the work hours against school, sleep, and safety. A summer job is most valuable when it builds skills without crowding out everything else,” said Challenger.

Reasons Teens Still Want Summer Jobs

Financial Needs: Many teens work to support themselves, save for school, or help with family expenses. Inflation has only sharpened that motivation.

Skill Development: A first job builds workplace habits — punctuality, professionalism, customer interaction — that pay off for years.

Independence: Earning a paycheck and managing a schedule are some of the fastest paths to confidence and independence.

Reasons Teens May Skip a Traditional Job

Academic Pressure: College-bound teens often prioritize coursework, test prep, and admissions activities.

Extracurricular Commitments: Year-round sports, music, and arts programs leave little room for a 30-hour-a-week summer shift.

Alternative Income: Online tutoring, content creation, and gig work let some teens earn without a traditional employer.

Other Priorities: Family travel, structured camps, and paid enrichment programs all compete for the summer calendar.

Tips for Teen Job Seekers This Summer

Start now. June remains the most popular month for teen hiring, but applications open well before school lets out. Teens who wait until summer begins will find competition fiercer and slots already filled.

Tap your network. Most teens have a bigger network than they realize. Reach out to parents, family friends, coaches, current and former teachers, and the managers of places you already go. A warm introduction beats a cold application.

Build a resume and use AI to polish it. Even a short resume listing extracurriculars, volunteer work, leadership roles, and any project work signals reliability and initiative. Generative AI tools are useful for drafting and proofreading cover letters and outreach emails — just make sure the final version sounds like you.

Look in unexpected places. Beyond retail, theme parks, and restaurants, many offices need help with filing, phones, social media, and basic administrative work. Paid internships in industries you care about can be more valuable than a generic summer gig.

Practice common interview questions. Be ready to talk about your strengths, what you're interested in, and why you want the job. Ask a parent, teacher, or coach to run through a few practice questions with you.

Make a strong first impression. Dress neatly, arrive on time, and be polite to everyone you meet — not just the hiring manager. Many employers ask the rest of the team for input before extending an offer.

Learn from rejection. If you don't get an offer, ask politely what you could have done differently. Even partial feedback can sharpen your next application.

Keep your online presence clean. Assume any employer will look. Tidy up public social profiles before you start applying.

Follow up. If you haven't heard back a week or so after applying, a short, polite check-in email or in-person visit shows real interest.

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Summer Employment Growth Among Workers Aged 16 to 19

| Year | May | June | July | Summer Jobs Gained | Change YoY |
|-------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------|
| 1998 | 270,000 | 1,058,000 | 675,000 | 2,003,000 | — |
| 1999 | 415,000 | 750,000 | 852,000 | 2,017,000 | 0.7% |
| 2000 | 111,000 | 1,087,000 | 311,000 | 1,509,000 | -25.2% |
| 2001 | 58,000 | 1,124,000 | 560,000 | 1,742,000 | 15.4% |
| 2002 | 161,000 | 985,000 | 510,000 | 1,656,000 | -4.9% |
| 2003 | 152,000 | 859,000 | 458,000 | 1,469,000 | -11.3% |
| 2004 | 168,000 | 827,000 | 597,000 | 1,592,000 | 8.4% |
| 2005 | 183,000 | 1,007,000 | 546,000 | 1,736,000 | 9.0% |
| 2006 | 230,000 | 1,033,000 | 471,000 | 1,734,000 | -0.1% |
| 2007 | 62,000 | 1,114,000 | 459,000 | 1,635,000 | -5.7% |
| 2008 | 116,000 | 683,000 | 355,000 | 1,154,000 | -29.4% |
| 2009 | 111,000 | 698,000 | 354,000 | 1,163,000 | 0.8% |
| 2010 | 6,000 | 497,000 | 457,000 | 960,000 | -17.5% |
| 2011 | 71,000 | 714,000 | 302,000 | 1,087,000 | 13.2% |
| 2012 | 157,000 | 858,000 | 382,000 | 1,397,000 | 28.5% |
| 2013 | 215,000 | 779,000 | 361,000 | 1,355,000 | -3.0% |
| 2014 | 217,000 | 661,000 | 419,000 | 1,297,000 | -4.3% |
| 2015 | 182,000 | 609,000 | 369,000 | 1,160,000 | -10.6% |
| 2016 | 156,000 | 691,000 | 492,000 | 1,339,000 | 15.4% |
| 2017 | 75,000 | 1,023,000 | 190,000 | 1,288,000 | -3.8% |
| 2018 | 130,000 | 951,000 | 307,000 | 1,388,000 | 7.8% |
| 2019 | 216,000 | 1,053,000 | 468,000 | 1,737,000 | 25.1% |
| 2020 | 594,000 | 1,129,000 | 469,000 | 2,192,000 | 26.2% |
| 2021 | 219,000 | 625,000 | 451,000 | 1,295,000 | -40.9% |
| 2022 | 153,000 | 885,000 | 201,000 | 1,239,000 | -4.3% |
| 2023 | 50,000 | 762,000 | 222,000 | 1,034,000 | -16.6% |
| 2024 | 190,000 | 792,000 | 95,000 | 1,077,000 | 4.2% |
| 2025 | 5,000 | 615,000 | 181,000 | 801,000 | -25.6% |
| 2026 (predicted) | — | — | — | 790,000 | -1.4% |
| Avg. since 1998 | 166,893 | 852,464 | 411,214 | 1,430,571 | — |
| Avg. since 2013 | 184,769 | 813,462 | 325,000 | 1,323,231 | — |

Source: Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc. with non-seasonally adjusted data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Note: 1948-1997 history available from BLS shows no prior summer below 932,000 (1949). The 1998-present table reflects Challenger's tracking series.