
“The Decline of the American Teenager’s Summer Job” by Lexington

About This Text

In this article, Lexington travels to the birthplace of Ronald Reagan to investigate the various causes of the decline in summer employment among American teenagers and to assert what this decline may indicate about the future of America.

Lexington is *The Economist’s* column on American politics. It was named after the town in Massachusetts where the first battle of the American war of independence took place.

As You Read

As you read this argument, look for the different types of evidence that are used.

MY NOTES

The Decline of the American Teenager's Summer Job

Lexington

It is striking how often self-made Americans have stories to tell about boring summer jobs

- 1 The first time that Ronald Reagan appeared on a newspaper front page was as a teenage lifeguard, hailed for saving a drowning man from a fast-flowing river. The future president was not yet “Ronnie”, America’s reassuring, twinkling, optimist-in-chief. He was still “Dutch”, to use his childhood nickname: a slim, bespectacled youth, serious to the point of priggishness. A biographer, Garry Wills, unearthed a high school yearbook in which Reagan scolded swimmers he pulled from the cool, treacherous Rock River, near his boyhood home of Dixon, Illinois. “A big hippopotamus with a sandwich in each hand, and some firewater tanked away,” Reagan wrote of one. Each summer from 1927 to 1932 the teenager would rise early to collect a 300lb block of ice and hamburger supplies before driving in his employer’s van to the river, working 12 hours a day, seven days a week. The post offered responsibility, money for college and stability in a childhood blighted by frequent moves, brushes with financial ruin and his father’s drinking. There was glory, too: in all he saved 77 lives. A picture of the Rock River hung in Reagan’s Oval Office.
- 2 Strikingly often, self-made Americans have stories to share about teenage jobs, involving alarm clocks clanging before dawn, aching muscles, stern bosses and soul-fortifying hours of boredom. In 1978, a record year in the annals of the Bureau of Labour Statistics, 72% of all teenagers were employed in July, the peak month for youthful ice-cream scooping, shelf-stacking and burger-flipping. But for two decades the traditional summer job has been in decline, with 43% of teens working in July 2016.
- 3 Lexington decided to head to Dixon to ask why. This being an anxious and litigious age, Reagan’s river beach is closed now. But the YMCA that trained him in lifesaving (and where he paraded as a drum major) still hires lifeguards. This summer finds one of them, Lexi Nelson, 18, between high school and community college, where she will study dental hygiene. Perhaps a quarter of her friends are working this season. The rest have mixed views of her job, which can start at five in the morning. “When I get up early they bash on it,” Miss Nelson reports, “but most of the time they’re jealous of the money.” Lifeguarding in an indoor pool is not the most exciting job, she concedes, but that teaches patience.

- 4 The story of the vanishing job is not a simple one. Ask teenagers, their employers and the mayor of Dixon—a business-owner who hires teenagers each summer at a pair of sandwich shops and a frozen yogurt store—and they point to two main causes: well-meaning adults and a changing economy.
- 5 Reagan’s stirring example is still taught in Dixon, a trim, conservative town, with an equestrian statue of the president on its riverfront and loudspeakers on lamp-posts that play the Carpenters and other easy-listening classics. But many parents discourage teens from working, it is widely agreed. Parents instead tell their children to study, take summer courses, volunteer or practise for sports that might help them compete for college places.
- 6 Local keepers of the Reagan flame see a town still filled with opportunities for self-advancement. Patrick Gorman, director of the Ronald Reagan Boyhood Home, a museum that preserves a house rented by the president’s family in Dixon, is confident that anyone who wants a job can find one, even if it might be “detasseling” corn—picking pollen tassels from growing corn cobs, an arduous summer task traditionally reserved for the young, involving cold mornings, baking middays and scratches from corn leaves. Mr Gorman easily found six teenagers to volunteer as museum guides: “Good kids migrate to good kids,” he beams.
- 7 Not all teenagers have the same needs. The three lifeguards interviewed at the YMCA are either college-bound or plan to be, and part-time work suits them. Bosses at the “Y” note that youngsters with only a high-school education typically have a different goal: landing a full-time job with health insurance and benefits.
- 8 Liandro Arellano Jr., Dixon’s mayor, argues that teenage job prospects have been complicated by well-intentioned politicians raising the state-wide minimum wage to \$8.25 an hour. For that pay it is both tempting and possible to hire college students or older workers with a proven job record, references and the ability to turn up on time, says Mr Arellano, a Republican. The youngest workers, below 18, earn \$7.75 but need more training, and those aged 15 need work permits and cannot touch slicers or big bread knives. Larger economic forces have buffeted Dixon, too. After the credit crunch of 2008, a flood of laid-off factory workers and experienced adults wanted to work for Mr Arellano. With unemployment rates now below 5% in Dixon, applicants for entry-level jobs are getting younger again. Teenagers can be fine summer helpers, he says—“They’re very excited about their first job”—though keeping them off smartphones is “a constant battle”.

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Buy That Teenager an Alarm Clock

- 9 Nationwide, affluent white teenagers have historically been much more likely to take summer jobs than lower-income, non-white youths. Family connections help, and it is easier to find work at a golf course or tennis club than amid inner-city blight. Though big cities like Chicago, 100 miles from Dixon, have government-run schemes that prod employers to offer summer work, demand exceeds supply: last year 77,000 Chicago youths applied for 31,000 summer jobs or internships. For all that, some of Mr Arellano's worst staff have been youngsters who do not need the money or want a job reference: they are the ones who quit without warning to go on a family holiday. Well-off parents are not always "super-supportive", he sighs.
- 10 Some parents may question the value of manual work in an age of high-tech change. But an elite education counts for little without self-discipline and resilience. Drudgery can teach humility: when hauling boxes, a brain full of algebra matters less than a teen's muscles. At best, it can breach the social barriers that harm democracy. Summer jobs are called all-American for a reason.