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## PORTLAND BUSINESS JOURNAL

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# Help wanted: Oregon teen jobless rate hits 31 percent

Portland Business Journal - by [Andy Giegerich](#) Business Journal staff writer

Jerry Williams wonders when her job search will finally end.

"I'll take anything, fast food, sales associate," said Williams, 18, who's sought work for four years. "There have been plenty of times when I was close to finding something. But they always wanted me to work too late. There'd be no time to do my homework."

Williams, who will graduate this spring from North Portland's **Rosemary Anderson High School**, is one of tens of thousands of Oregon teenagers seeking work.

The state's teen unemployment rate — those between 16 and 19 who are actually seeking jobs — averaged 31.2 percent during 2009. That's the country's third-highest level, behind California and Nevada. Overall, the nation's teen unemployment rate was 26.8 percent in December.

Teen unemployment hasn't been this high in Oregon since World War II.

"This is some scary stuff," said Andrew McGough, executive director of Portland-based employment specialist **Worksystems Inc.** "Work provides the best teacher of life skills. We're in danger of losing that."

Economists disagree as to why Oregon's teen unemployment rate is so high. Many blame Oregon's minimum wage, at \$8.40 per hour the third-highest in the country. Some blame immigration.

It could also be an outgrowth of Oregon's inflated adult unemployment levels, at 11 percent the nation's 10th highest. Adults and college students might be taking jobs traditionally filled by teenagers.

Karin Devencenzi, general manager of Portland's South Park Seafood Grill and Wine Bar, said the restaurant can't afford to hire and train industry newcomers, such as teenagers.

"We found that for what we'd be paying them, there's too much of a learning curve, and that paying someone who needs 90 days to get comfortable in their role is too expensive," she said.

Business groups view teen joblessness as a huge problem. The **Manufacturing 21 coalition**, which touts the state's industrial sector, is pushing lawmakers to add more entry-level summer jobs programs. Powerful business groups **Associated Oregon Industries** and Associated General Contractors back the coalition's efforts.

"We have this terrible economy with lots of skilled workers sitting on the bench, but the reality is, with fewer teens working, there are a lot of people who are also coming into the labor force who are much less qualified than people who are leaving it," said McGough.

Studies show that teens who don't work often have difficulty adapting to a professional environment later in life. **Northeastern University** researchers reported in 2008 that working teens enjoy more earning power as adults.

Rosemary Anderson senior Dadreauna Martin has sought work for the past year in a child-care job. She eventually hopes to enter the health care field.

"A lot of places say they're hiring, that they need people really badly," she said. "But I haven't been getting any calls back."

To help provide such experience, groups such as Worksystems have developed more programs for teens. The Youth Summer Works program provided summer jobs for nearly 1,300 workers between the ages of 16 and 24 last year.

A Worksystems partner, the **Portland Opportunities Industrialization Center**, provides employment training services specifically to Rosemary Anderson High School students.

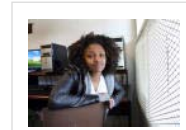
Williams recently enrolled in the center's Youth Empowerment Employment Program, which provides work training and job placement services to at-risk youths.

She hopes to apply any money toward nursing classes at **Portland Community College**, which she plans to start taking this year.

"If I can find something now, it will help me get an internship once I start at PCC," she said. "I have a resume and have made a lot of calls. It just hasn't worked out."

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Rosemary Anderson High School senior Jerry Williams has been seeking employment for years.

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