I. Investment in youth

1. Youth, unemployment and marginality: The problem and the solution

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All societies invest in the socialization of their young to roles valued for adults. Whereas traditionally the locus of this socialization was the family, with industrialization, adult work roles increasingly moved outside of family control. Many societies began compulsory education for all young people, and extended it to older ages. These social changes subsequently postponed the age at which young people began to work and extended the responsibility for socialization of youth from families to schools. Extended schooling with same-age peers especially influenced the nature of adolescence, the transition period between childhood and adulthood.

These social changes have made responsibility for socialization of youth more diffuse, thereby increasing the likelihood that young people are not well integrated into society (e.g., Rutter, 1980). Indeed, several scholars (e.g., Lewin, 1939; Muuss, 1975) consider the period of adolescence to be an inherently marginal one, a time when individuals may possess the requisite competence for adult work and family roles but are denied access to these roles. Such adolescent problems as alienation, delinquency, and substance use are frequently attributed to the lack of a challenging social role (e.g., Conger & Petersen, 1984; Erikson, 1968). This is not meant to imply that adolescents are without roles. By definition adolescents occupy social roles in several contexts (e.g., family, school, peer group). The premise is that adolescents are alienated or marginalized

in such a way that they cannot assume active, meaningful, and productive roles in adult society (Nightingale & Wolverton, 1988).

A major adult role that is outside the purview of many adolescents is the work role. A shortage of work opportunities or difficulty in attaining those jobs that do exist can pose major problems for adolescents. Over the past few decades, the labor markets in postindustrial societies have experienced profound changes due to rapid technological advances. Youth have come to experience increasingly heavy demands for the proper education and socialization to prepare them to meet the requirements for jobs or careers.

Coupled with these technological advances have been changes in the structures and functioning of the family, the primary institution responsible for the socialization of children. Most industrialized societies are experiencing increasing rates of divorce, remarriage, and single-parent households, along with sharply rising maternal employment rates. As a result, many modern households are becoming less capable of performing the educational and supportive functions of "traditional" families. Due in part to the changing nature of family relations, the responsibility for providing the necessary education and support to prepare youth for successful adult life has increasingly shifted to formal educational institutions and community-based organizations (Hamburg, 1990).

Employment is generally recognized as a significant step in the socialization of adolescents, allowing them to take on responsible, productive adult roles in society. Working not only provides vocational experience but also affords youth a valuable opportunity to interact with people other than family and peers. In addition, work environments force adolescents to make decisions under a variety of circumstances, thereby giving youth feelings of responsibility and independence. Furthermore, the money earned on the job reduces financial dependence upon adults, helping adults to recognize adolescents as contributing to family well-being, as well as to society in general (Peters, 1987; Phillips & Sandstrom, 1990).

Current Trends in Unemployment

Youth unemployment has become an issue of widespread concern throughout the world, especially in western industrialized economies (Glover, 1986; Levin, 1983; Melvyn & Freedman, 1979). The U.S. government has expressed concern over youth joblessness since the 1960s, but over the past decade, western European countries began to confront massive youth unemployment for the first time in more than 30 years (Lerman, 1986). Table 1.1 summarizes youth unemployment trends from 1981

Table 1.1 *Youth unemployment percentage rates in 12 OECD countries*[1]

	1981	1983	1985	1987	1989
Australia	10.8	17.9	14.3	14.6	10.4
Canada	13.3	19.8	16.3	13.7	11.3
Finland	9.2	10.5	9.1	9.0	6.1
France	17.0	19.7	25.6	23.0	19.0
Germany	6.5	10.7	9.5	8.1	n/a
Italy	25.8	30.5	33.9	35.5	35.6
Japan	4.0	4.5	4.8	5.2	4.5
Norway	5.7	8.9	6.5	5.3	11.5
Spain	31.1	37.6	43.8	40.2	32.0
Sweden	6.3	8.0	5.8	4.2	3.0
United Kingdom	17.9	23.4	21.8	17.4	8.6
United States	14.3	16.4	13.0	11.7	10.5
Average of countries	13.5	17.3	17.0	15.7	13.9

[1]The term *youth* refers to the 15–24 age group in all countries except the United States (14–24) and the United Kingdom, Italy, Norway, Spain, and Sweden (16–24). Dates and methods of statistical collection vary slightly from country to country. Compiled from Tables in *Labour Force Statistics 1968–1988* (OECD, 1990).

to 1989 in the 12 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1990).[1]

Although the most recent trends seem promising for these OECD member countries, it is important to remember that the percentage of unemployed youth throughout the 1980s represents the highest incidence of unemployment in the industrialized nations since World War II, and the highest absolute number of unemployed workers since the Great Depression of the 1930s (Borowski, 1984).

In most of these countries, certain groups are more prone to joblessness than others. For instance, the proportion of adolescents who are unemployed is typically two to three times greater than that of adults (Banducci, 1984; Markey, 1988). In the United States, minority groups such as blacks and Hispanics have far higher unemployment rates than whites (Borowski, 1984; Levin, 1983). In addition, the United States and other industrialized nations share the problem of a higher concentration of unemployment among youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Lerman, 1986).

Causes of Youth Unemployment

Adolescent joblessness has been attributed to four factors: (1) a demographic increase in youth entering the labor force, (2) social policies such as mandatory minimum wages that exceed youthful workers' productivity value to employers, (3) insufficient education and training, and (4) generally poor economic conditions under which youth suffer more than older adults (Levin, 1983).

Changing demographics of youth

One of the most popular explanations for the deterioration of youth employment opportunity is that the number of youth entering the labor force has risen at a rate far higher than the rate at which jobs for youth are created (Levin, 1983). In the decades following the U.S. "baby boom" after World War II, there have been large increases in the number of 16- to 24-year-olds; the population of baby-boomers reached its peak around 1978 (Markey, 1988). The number of high school graduates entering the U.S. labor market steadily declined throughout the 1980s (Herr & Long, 1983). However, though demographic factors may account for some change in youth unemployment, they are not a major or singular cause. First, not all youth experience the same employment opportunities. In the United States, black, Hispanic, and low-income youth have endured much greater unemployment than have whites or other youth from families of high socioeconomic status (Lerman, 1986; Levin, 1983). In fact, in the United States, the proportion of employed white youths actually improved between 1969 and 1977, whereas that of nonwhites deteriorated (Bowers, 1979; Freeman & Wise, 1982; Ginzberg, 1980; Newman, 1979). Second, although the population of youth peaked in the late 1970s and began declining in the 1980s, job opportunities still have not been sufficient to meet the demand (Levin, 1983). Third, some countries have experienced increased youth unemployment with no corresponding rise in the population of youth.

Minimum wages

A second explanation for high youth unemployment is that minimum wage requirements for youth have "priced them out" of jobs, because youths' productive contributions to the employer are not worth the mandatory wages (Levin, 1983). In other words, it is assumed that employers either will hire "more productive" adults or will invest capital in more

cost-effective production methods, instead of giving jobs to youth. But despite increases in minimum wages in countries such as the United States and Australia in the 1970s, the relative earnings of youth as compared to adults still declined, suggesting that minimum wages—at least in these two countries—are not primary causes of youth unemployment in recent years.

Inadequate education and training

A third rationale for the youth unemployment crisis focuses on the decrease in the quality of education and training. According to this view, adolescents are becoming less and less equipped with the skills required for productive employment (Levin, 1983). Proponents of this view claim that if the educational system were functioning adequately, creating a more qualified and skilled youth population, such youth would not face unemployment (Hoare, 1980).

In general, more highly educated youth are in fact less likely to face unemployment than are less educated ones (Levin, 1983). However, rather widespread evidence indicates that educational standards in the United States have fallen since the late 1960s, based on the results of standardized tests of basic reading and math skills administered to secondary school students (Levin, 1983). Although there is considerable debate as to whether such achievement tests adequately reflect student job skills, some have argued that these declines mean that increasing numbers of post–high school students lack the requisite skills to obtain productive jobs. Falling test scores may reflect young people's decreasing effort in school as the benefits from secondary education (such as access to decent jobs) decline.

Although some claim that technological advances create more complex jobs that require higher skill levels, the bulk of research evidence suggests that technology and automation have actually "deskilled" entry-level jobs, particularly when computers have replaced human decision making (see Berg, Freedman, & Freedman, 1978; Braverman, 1974; Rumberger, 1981). The deteriorating job performances (Williams, 1979) and the high quit rates (Lerman, 1986) of youth may be responses to the routinization and boredom of many jobs, as well as the discontinuity between youth employment opportunities and long-term career development (Brown, 1990).

In sum, for the most part, youth with higher levels of education do appear to have greater access to available employment. However, it may

be that declines in educational attainment among youth are in fact responses to the depressed job market and the lessening of challenges on the job, rather than causes of youth unemployment (Levin, 1983).

Poor economic conditions

Although youth population increases, minimum wage standards, and declining education and training all may have some impact, the factor that has proven to be most consistently related to youth unemployment throughout the world has been the general state of the economy (Levin, 1983). Poor economic conditions, reflected in societal unemployment rates, appear to be the most important single factor in youth unemployment (Borowski, 1984; Levin, 1983). As the overall employment rate for industrialized nations deteriorates, the rates of youth unemployment rise commensurately. In industrialized countries, youth seem to be the prime targets when there is economic decline. The U.S. Department of Labor (1979) concluded:

> Perhaps the most significant fact about the youth labor market from a policy viewpoint is the severe disruption brought about by declining aggregate economic conditions. The initial job is more difficult to procure, young workers are more likely to be pushed out of their jobs, the duration of unemployment is extended, and wage growth is depressed. (pp. 163–164)

Although the state of the economy may be the major cause of unemployment for the youth population in general, the factors determining the employment situation of economically disadvantaged and minority youths—who are at highest risk of marginalization—are multidimensional (Herr & Long, 1983). Quarles and Hannenberg (1982) describe the causes of unemployment for these youth as follows:

> A substantial proportion of youths are disadvantaged, facing barriers in finding employment. These barriers include inadequate training and marginal basic skills. Moreover, many are lacking the attitudinal and job-seeking skills necessary to gain and maintain jobs. For the most part, the jobs available to teenagers are at the bottom of the scale. Predictably, many of these jobs have few incentives for the employer and the employee to develop long-term relationships. Dead-end jobs tend to produce high turnover and high unemployment even when overall unemployment is low. Fundamentally, the problem of youth unemployment is the same as that of the adult population—*not enough jobs to go around*. The rate of youth unemployment mirrors and magnifies the larger problem of the

economy. However, unemployment hits young people from poverty-level and working-class families hardest. (p. 63)

Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a period in which youth make a transition from the security of their family in childhood to the autonomy and responsibility of adulthood. To achieve a comprehensive sense of physical, mental, and social well-being, essential for healthy adulthood (Hurrelmann, 1990), it is necessary for adolescents to develop in ways that permit them to identify their needs and hopes, and to feel effective in their achievements (Hurrelmann & Engel, 1989).

Identity formation

An adolescent's functioning in various social domains influences, and is influenced by, identity formation. During adolescence, cognitive gains in abstract reasoning ability are used to reevaluate and reintegrate one's self-definition or self-concept, and to begin the process of committing oneself to meaningful adult roles (Erikson, 1968). Erikson (1955) claims that societies universally grant terms of *moratorium* to adolescents, defining it as an "institutionalized period of delay granted to someone who is not ready to meet an obligation or forced on somebody who should give himself time to do so" (p. 5). During this period, adolescents have the opportunity to experiment freely with different roles and psychological states and are exempt from taking on full adult responsibilities and commitments (Rapoport, 1988). Osterman (1978) characterizes this "moratorium stage" as a period in which "weak labor force attachments" permit many youth to change jobs and move in and out of the workforce often (Herr & Long, 1983).

However, many societies now prolong this period of moratorium, due in part to failing economic conditions that have decreased job opportunities for youth. Thus, the period of adolescent uncertainty is moving further and further into ages that once were considered to be adult.

Career development

One of the primary roles adolescents begin to prepare for is the work role. Given this, there is a growing interest among social scientists, the business community, and policy makers in the processes by which youth form their occupational identities and later perform in their careers. Recently, several

U.S. social scientists have pointed out shortcomings in the theory, research, and practice (vocational guidance) of career development, especially with respect to marginal youth.

Led by Super (1953, 1957, 1963), the major theoretical contributions to career development during adolescence have focused on (1) comparing the characteristics of the individual (e.g., gender, race, personality characteristics) to characteristics of occupations and (2) the crystallization of vocational *choice* via the development and testing of occupational preferences (Hamilton, 1987b; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986). Thinking of the occupational development of socioeconomically disadvantaged youth in terms of career choice is misleading, because as Hamilton (1987b) points out, for these youth, "the process of finding employment is not terribly rational, is seriously constrained by labor market conditions, and represents an accommodation to economic reality rather than an optimal matching" (p. 286). Further, research has been for the most part nondevelopmental and descriptive, and has not enhanced understanding of the conditions that influence the quality of the fit between the individual and the demands of the job (cf. Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986).

Super's (1957) theoretical framework has had a substantial impact on vocational guidance in the United States, where vocational guidance counselors help individuals to assess their occupational interests, strengths, and weaknesses and to find relevant occupations. This approach to intervention bypasses the needs of marginal youth, most of whom do not have the luxury of choosing among several plausible careers. For many disadvantaged youth, "careers" may be limited to employment in low-paying, low-status jobs in the secondary labor market. These youth need help in developing traits that will enhance their employability, such as punctuality, grooming, respect for authority, and problem-solving and social skills (Hamilton, 1987b).

Developmental Transitions

Periods of life in which there is significant change in social roles, biological status, or both have been termed *developmental transitions* (e.g., Petersen, Kennedy, & Sullivan, in press; Petersen, Susman, & Beard, 1989). Because adolescence now is prolonged in many societies, it has become a period of life itself, and not simply a transition from childhood to adulthood.

The transition out of adolescence is most typically defined by the entry into adult roles (e.g., Petersen et al., 1989). In most developed societies, however, there is no clearly defined, single time of entry into adult roles. This current status of the transition to adulthood contrasts sharply

with that of traditional times, in which entry into adult society was marked by a *rite de passage*. In many societies currently, there is one age at which one can vote and another at which one may be considered legally responsible. Initiation of the two major adult social roles—work and family—may occur at entirely different times from each other and from legally defined adulthood.

Gradual acquisition of adult status may be an advantage for some youth, easing the transition to adulthood and the accommodation to new roles. However, when the work role is delayed significantly several negative consequences may result.

Marginality of Youth: The Lack of a Social Role

A major stress for an increasing number of youth stems from their lack of a meaningful place or role in industrialized societies. The quotations that follow point to the detrimental consequences of societal changes for the adolescent transition from childhood into adulthood.

> Being a teenager is not easy. The opportunities are few and far between for taking on meaningful roles that are valued by others. Unable to demonstrate their own capabilities and lacking the classic rites of passage, youth become strangers. The avenues one must travel to achieve adult status are unmarked. The process must be perplexing no less than lonely. . . . While education, employment, and military sectors do absorb large numbers of youth and slot them into roles that, at least, "keep them busy," there are large numbers of other youth who fall through the cracks. . . . This (marginal) group is of particular concern, not only because of the individual tragedies but because of the cumulative impact on the social fabric. These youth are highly prone to have sustained periods of unemployment, to be in conflict with the law, and to be caught in a spiral of defeat. (Rist, 1981, pp. 3–4)

> The advance of technological society has drastically altered the status of young people: where once there were useful outlets for youthful energies in forms that included work on family farms and small businesses and unskilled labor in developing industries, changing economic realities have foreclosed many or most of these outlets. As a result, many young people have been forced to postpone their entry into, or often even their exposure to, adult activities. Today's jobs require greater skills, and the economy and the labor market can now barely support the adult population. The consequent economic