

## Highlighting New Poverty Research

by Charles Hirschman  
and Irina Voloshin

"The Structure of Teenage Employment: Social Background and the Jobs Held by High School Seniors," published in *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, Vol. 25, Issue 3 (October 2007)

Charles Hirschman is Professor of Public Affairs and Boeing International Professor of Sociology at the University of Washington. He is a Faculty Affiliate of the West Coast Poverty Center. Irina Voloshin is a Doctoral Candidate and Research Assistant in Sociology at the University of Washington.

The West Coast Poverty Center's "POVERTY RESEARCH FLASH" highlights new research by Center faculty affiliates and others on causes, consequences, and effective policy responses to poverty, with an emphasis on changing labor markets, demographic shifts, family structure, and social and economic inequality. More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: [www.wcpc.washington.edu](http://www.wcpc.washington.edu)

September 2008

## The Structure of Teenage Employment: Social Background and the Jobs Held by High School Seniors

**Background.** Most full-time high school seniors are also part-time workers. Although the traditional view is that working while a student is detrimental to academic outcomes, prior research finds mixed support for the claim of a negative impact. The academic consequences of working while in high school may depend on the time commitment and the work environment characterizing teen jobs. The focus of this study is to describe the structure of the teenage job market and to test whether teens from advantaged family backgrounds are more likely to find better jobs (fewer hours of work and higher status) than students from poorer socioeconomic origins.

**Methods.** Using data from a sample of nearly 6,000 high school seniors surveyed by the University of Washington-Beyond High School Project (2000, 2002, 2003, and 2004 senior cohorts), Charles Hirschman and Irina Voloshin investigate racial, ethnic, gender and socioeconomic disparities in employment among all high school seniors and disparities in hours worked and occupations among teens who work. The researchers first provide descriptive data and then use multinomial logistic regression analyses to explore whether and how race, ethnicity, gender, family background, and academic performance affect employment status, the intensity of work (i.e., hours per week), and the types of jobs held by teen workers. Job type is measured by a three-category occupational typology of stereotypical teenage (fast food and service/retail), white/pink-collar, and blue-collar jobs.

**Findings.** Most high school seniors were working (58 percent), and two-thirds of those students worked in typical teenage jobs in food preparation, retail sales, and personal services (such as child care). Some aspects of teenage employment mirror patterns in the broader labor market. For example, female students were more likely to work in white- and pink-collar jobs such as clerical occupations, while male students were more likely to work in blue-collar jobs, such as construction, stocking, and landscaping. But the majority of male and female workers worked in fast food and related service jobs. Minority students, especially blacks and Hispanics, were less likely to be employed than white students, and employed minority students were more concentrated in typical teen jobs (fast food) than in positions where non-routine skills might be acquired.

The multivariate analysis confirmed the descriptive findings and demonstrated clear patterns of stratification in the teen job market. Controlling for family status, grades, and educational aspirations, black and Hispanic students were less likely to be employed than white students and less likely to find "good" jobs (less than 15 hours per week and in the higher status white/pink-collar sectors). Beyond race and ethnicity, students from families where parents did not attend college and students with lower grades and lower educational ambitions were more likely to be in "bad" jobs requiring more than 15 hours per week and in the typical teen jobs and blue-collar sectors. There were also persistent gender differentials. Females were more likely to work than males and to work in "good jobs" (less than 15 hours per week and in white- or pink-collar jobs).

# Poverty Research Flash

The West Coast Poverty Center serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and effective approaches to reducing it in the west coast states. The Center, located at the University of Washington, is one of three regional poverty centers funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: [www.wcpc.washington.edu](http://www.wcpc.washington.edu)

## Poverty Research Flash 2008-10

### The Structure of Teenage Employment: Social Background and the Jobs Held by High School Seniors

New research from Charles Hirschman and Irina Voloshin

#### Key Findings

- Among a sample of nearly 6,000 students in the Pacific Northwest, more than half (58 percent) of high school seniors worked. Those who worked averaged 19 hours per week and earned roughly \$8 per hour. Two-thirds of teens worked in retail sales, food preparation, and personal service jobs.
- Female students were more likely to work than male students. Most males and females worked in fast food and other typical teen jobs, but females were more likely to work in child care, retail sales and clerical jobs, while males dominated in blue-collar jobs.
- Black and Hispanic students were less likely than white students to work and when employed, they worked in less desirable jobs. These disparities could not be explained by family background, academic performance, and educational expectations.
- Family background and academic performance and ambitions also mattered for student job quality. Students with lower grades and lower educational ambitions and whose parents did not attend college were more likely to work over 15 hours per week and to work in typical teenage jobs or blue-collar jobs.