

Joblessness soars among youth

By Courtney Vaughn
Hi-Desert Star

MORONGO BASIN — Young people make up the largest portion of unemployed people in the nation, a recent study found.

Kids Count, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, reveals the employment rate among America's youth is the lowest it's been since World War II.

According to statistics provided by San Bernardino County's Workforce Development Department, people between the ages of 16 and 19 make up 35.3 percent of the state's unemployed population.

The Kids Count policy report credits the loss of manufacturing and construction jobs for the jobless rates, but according to Kids Count, many of those young people are not seeking an education either.

"Overall, 6.5 million people ages 16 to 24 are both out of school and out of work, statistics that suggest dire consequences for financial stability and employment prospects in that population," the report states.

Over the last four years, more people have competed for lower paying jobs than in prior years.

The Kids Count report shows socioeconomic status also plays a factor.

Youth and young adults who come from households with incomes below \$20,000 are two and a half to three times less likely to find

employment than those who come from high-earning households.

Education trend reverses in Basin

While many of the nation's young are neither working or pursuing education, that may not hold true in the Morongo Basin.

Here, community college enrollment has increased during the economic downturn. Last year, Copper Mountain College had its highest enrollment level ever. But across the county, high school dropout rates are also on the uptick, according to Workforce Development.

"There are fewer jobs today, and employers are demanding higher skills in a labor market transformed by globalization and technology. Also, fewer than half of our high school students graduate on time and are ready for college. Young people with limit-

ed education and job-readiness skills find fewer employment opportunities," the policy report states.

Even with the odds against them, many young people are balancing both employment and education.

Cynthia Gonzales, of Yucca Valley, started working at Taco Bell when she was 17.

"It was kind of tough to find work at first, because I was 17, not 18," she recalled. It didn't take her long to find a job though. Now at 18, Gonzales has maintained her job and is attending Copper Mountain College.

County academy trains at-risk kids

On a county level, there are programs available to at-risk youth, to keep them on track. Currently, the county reports an 11.2 percent unemployment rate.

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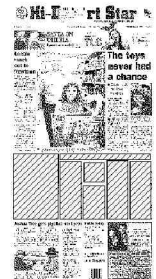
Miguel McQueen of Workforce Development said the county provides services through the Workforce Investment Act.

"We focus primarily on the 17- to 21-year-olds," McQueen said last week.

He said historically, unemployment rates among the county's youth are three times higher than those of adults.

Using job training centers like Mojave River Academy, young people can attend a year-long program that gives them basic refresher skills, if needed, and the professional skills needed to enter the workforce.

"They're at-risk, which typically means they have a barrier. They get pre- and post-



employment maturities, which means we teach you how to get a job and keep a job," McQueen explained.

The program serves about 650 people a year in San Bernardino County. Currently, the county does not operate any job training facilities in the Morongo Basin, but McQueen said as in years past, the county could partner with the local school district to offer services. Kids Count credits programs like these for addressing some of the challenges young people face in seeking employment.

"Research demonstrates a positive return on investment for programs that advance academic, social and career skills," the report states.

Without work

Unemployment rates in the Morongo Basin

Morongo Valley: 7.8%

Yucca Valley: 10.3%

Joshua Tree: 12.7%

Twentynine Palms: 13.5%

Source: Monthly Labor Force Data, San Bernardino County



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Cynthia Gonzales, 18, works the cash register at the Yucca Valley Taco Bell, where she has worked since she was 17. Nationally, unemployment rates among young people are the highest they've been in 50 years.