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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Out of Sight

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When the dismal unemployment numbers were released on Friday (at the same time that oil prices were surging to record highs), I thought about the young people at the bottom of the employment ladder.

Below the bottom, actually.

A shudder went through the markets when the Labor Department reported that the official jobless rate had jumped one-half a percentage point in May to 5.5 percent — the sharpest spike in 22 years.

The young people I'm talking about wouldn't have noticed. These are the teenagers and young adults — roughly 16 to 24 years old — who are not in school and basically have no hope of finding work. The bureaucrats compiling the official unemployment rate don't even bother counting these young people. They are no one's constituency. They might as well not exist.

Except that they do exist. There are four million or more of these so-called disconnected youths across the country. They hang out on street corners in cities large and small — and increasingly in suburban and rural areas.

If you ask how they survive from day to day, the most likely response is: "I hustle," which could mean anything from giving haircuts in a basement to washing a neighbor's car to running the occasional errand.

Or it could mean petty thievery or drug dealing or prostitution or worse.

This is the flip side of the American dream. The United States economy, which has trouble producing enough jobs to keep the middle class intact, has left these youngsters all-but-completely behind.

"These kids are being challenged in ways that my generation was not," said David Jones, the president of the Community Service Society of New York, which tries to develop ways to connect these young men and women with employment opportunities, or get them back into school.

It is extremely difficult because, for the most part, the jobs are not there and the educational establishment is having a hard enough time teaching the kids who are still in school.

“Schools have not made much of an effort to bring this population back in,” said Mr. Jones. “Once you fall out of the system, you’re basically on no one’s programmatic radar screen.”

So these kids drift. Some are drawn to gangs. A disproportionate number become involved in crime. It is a tragic story, and very few people are paying attention.

The economic policies of the past few decades have favored the wealthy and the well-connected to a degree that has been breathtaking to behold. The Nation magazine has devoted its current issue to the Gilded Age-type inequality that has been the result.

Just a little bit of help to the millions of youngsters trying to get their first tentative foothold in that economy should not be too much to ask.

It’s not as if these kids don’t want to work. Many of them search and search until they finally become discouraged. The summer job market, which has long been an important first step in preparing teenagers for the world of work, is shaping up this year as the weakest in more than half a century, according to the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston.

Now, with the overall economy deteriorating, the situation for poorly educated young people will only grow worse. As Andrew Sum, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies, told The Times recently:

“When you get into a recession, kids always get hit the hardest. Kids always go to the back of the hiring queue. Now, they find themselves with a lot of other people in line ahead of them.”

As the ranks of these youngsters grow, so does their potential to become a destabilizing factor in the society.

More important, the U.S. needs the untapped talent (and the potential buying power) in this large pool of young people, just as it needs the talents of the many other Americans of all ages whose energy, intelligence and creativity are wasted in an economic system that is not geared toward providing jobs for everyone who wants to work.

America needs to dream bigger, and in this election year, job creation should be issue No. 1. If I were running for president, I would pull together the smartest minds I could find from government, the corporate world, the labor movement, academia, the nonprofits and ordinary working men and women to see what could be done to spark the creation of decent jobs on a scale that would bring the U.S. as close as possible to full employment.

We’ve maxed out the credit cards, floated mindlessly in stock market bubbles, refinanced mortgages to death — now’s the time to figure out how to put all Americans to work.