

Job Opportunities for Youth? Report Points to Janitorial Services



A window cleaner works on a glass office tower roof. According to a new report by the Center for an Urban Future, jobs in the property maintenance industry are growing faster than those in other sectors in New York City. AP/Mark Baker

If you ask people what the most popular jobs for young New Yorkers are, many would say baristas at Starbucks or sales assistants in chain retailers like Uniqlo, where you can make an average \$8 to \$10 per hour, or no more than \$20,000 a year with regular working hours. But did you know an average janitor in New York City could easily make more than that?

A recent report by the Center for an Urban Future¹ (CUF) reveals the median salary for New York janitors is \$30,870, nearly 14 percent more than any coffee shop jobs. Although this occupation may not sound sexy, it does have a future. The State Labor Department is projecting 1,700 openings in janitorial jobs every year through 2018, making it one of the most promising fields for young people without college degrees.

“Some of the jobs actually start at a relatively low wage,” said Jonathan Bowles, the executive director of CUF who supervised the report, who added that “they also have a lot of room for advancement.”

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This chart from the new Center for an Urban Future report compares job growth in different sectors of New York City's economy. Image courtesy of Center for an Urban Future.

The national unemployment rate soared to 8.2 percent in May, but the figure for youth unemployment is more than double that. According to a youth employment support organization, Jobs First NYC² (JFNYC), in New York City alone, nearly 175,000 young adults between 18 to 24 are currently “out-of-school, out-of-work and out-of-luck.”

Many inexperienced young adults, particularly those without a college degree, have been discouraged from looking for jobs by the dismal job market and competition with skilled job seekers, said the executive director of JFNYC, Louis Miceli.

In an economy where most decent paying jobs require at least some sort of associate degrees, blue-collar industries are now actively hiring and growing, and they do provide a path to middle-class salaries.

By CUF's estimates, there will be more than 2,640 opportunities a year in property maintenance, which includes janitorial, cleaning, building maintenance and repair jobs, as well as 460 jobs in telecommunication and utility works. The number is projected to grow by six percent over the next six years. None of these jobs ask for more than high school degree. Only short-term vocational training is required.

Some of the occupations provide solid paychecks to entry-level workers, the report points out. For instance, the median

starting salary for general building maintenance workers is \$27,000, and can reach the average salary of \$41,680. The salary for equipment installers and repairers is much higher: \$46,110 for entry-level workers and \$69,560 for professionals.

The report suggests these are good fields for young people with limited degrees and who don't mind working their way up from the bottom. Among all the general maintenance workers in New York City, nearly 43 percent have only a high school diploma and 14 percent did not graduate from high school.

"Most of these jobs are not sexy and not getting attention from the news media, but these are the fields where young adults can realistically get hired," said Bowles.

Even though these jobs are expected to grow rapidly, in reality they haven't been very attractive to young people.

"These manual jobs often don't immediately lead them to the next step, and young people don't even know what career ladders exist." said Miceli. "So rather they see these jobs as dead-end."

Mallory Scott, 38, a janitor working at a private sector building in Hell's Kitchen, said she seldom sees co-workers under 24 years old. The average age at her work place is 40 to 45. Scott has been in her position for seven years. She works eight hours a day, five days a week, receives health benefits and enjoys a three-week vacation every year.

"A lot of young kids are not gravitating to this type of business," said Scott, who believes a janitorial job is stable enough to support her and her family. "For those people who probably feel [the job] is degrading, they don't know what we make. They could be making \$15 [an hour] and they have no clue that I'm making almost \$30."

Start-up janitors in New York City typically earn \$10 to \$11 per hour, Scott said, and the pay rises to \$15 to \$16 if they become union members. Many janitors in New York City, even in the private sector, are organized, like the SEIU 32 BJ office cleaners who nearly went on strike last December. In the public sector, many janitors have long been organized. During the Republican presidential primary campaign, candidate Newt Gingrich took heat when he suggested public school districts replace their unionized janitorial staffs with young workers. But Gingrich's comments were particularly controversial because he was talking about jobs for people 18 and under. Three months is the average period before being eligible for union membership. General cleaners are able to be promoted to utility workers — as long as they develop sufficient skills — and to supervisors or foremen.

Charlie Roina, 24, is currently struggling with his employment status. After graduating from high school, he had worked in medical assistance and public relations until he was recently laid off. Truly understanding the challenge of finding a job without a competitive degree, he said he appreciates and respects any kind of occupation.

"I don't think I know anyone that would say there's anything wrong with working on a blue collar job," said Roina, "Especially these days where it is extremely difficult to get any job, some people have to take what they can and that is fine."

Read the full Center for an Urban Future report, complete with this reporter's notes and highlighting:

References

1. [^ Center for an Urban Future](http://www.nycfuture.org/)
(<http://www.nycfuture.org/>)
2. [^ Jobs First NYC](http://www.jobsfirstnyc.org/)
(<http://www.jobsfirstnyc.org/>)

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