

Emma Allen drives herself to work most days. It's convenient, but the cost of car insurance stretches her limited budget.

PHOTO BY SEAN HAVEY FOR CALIFORNIA DREAM

somebody maybe by their wrinkles and the gray in their hair, and not necessarily by what they can contribute to the workplace."

Last year, Los Angeles saw a 22 percent spike in the number of homeless seniors 62 and older. Trejo thinks that convincing more employers to hire seniors could be one way to reverse that trend.

"We're seeing lots of high-risk older adults, because of the economics in Los Angeles," she said. Seniors are paying high rents, and their fixed incomes aren't keeping up with the escalating cost of living.

"All of us should be worried. All of us should be paying attention and caring," Trejo said.

Allen needs a new job because Social Security isn't enough to live on. After paying her rent, she has only a few hundred dollars to budget for food, utilities, car insurance and other expenses.

Like many seniors, she has no savings. They were depleted by medical bills toward the end of her husband's life. According to a 2015 report from the National Institute on Retirement Security, nearly

30 percent of working households age 55 to 64 are headed into their retirement years with zero savings.

"I don't have a choice," Allen said. "I need the income."

The Great Recession only made things worse for many Californians nearing retirement, especially black and Latino seniors.

The racial wealth gap widened during the financial crisis. A decade later, U.S. black and Mexican households in Los Angeles have only 1 percent of the wealth held by white households, according to a report from the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.

Rhee, from the UC Berkeley Labor Center, has seen the lingering effects of the recession push her mother back into the workforce. Her mom lost her home during the financial crisis. Now in her early 70s, she works a few days a week at a Costco.

"She'll say, 'I enjoy working,'" Rhee said, because the job offers social connection and keeps her mother's mind active. "But the primary reason she's there is that she needs the income."

Older women can't rely as much on Social Security. Their benefits tend to be lower, because they were paid less than men throughout their careers.

"Single women tend to have it the worst off," Rhee said. "California really needs to confront the fact that we have an aging population, and what that's going to mean for things like senior poverty, the need for housing and supportive services."

Working is nothing new for Allen. She started working at 15 and hasn't stopped since. She's been a probation officer, a special education teacher's aide, a meat packing plant worker and, now, she's open to pretty much anything.

"I'm a people person," she said. "Anything to do with people."

Allen has had to constantly look for a job in order to stay in her job training program. Her search is documented in a thick manila folder. Every place she's applied to has its own entry.

"I went to JC Penney, I went to Big Lots," she said, flipping through a large stack of paperwork. "Jack in the Box, Target ..."

Many employers tell her to apply online, but Allen's computer skills are limited. Her kids help out with those applications. But so far, no luck.

No one has ever outright told her she's too old to get hired. But Allen thinks age discrimination is part of why she's not getting called back.

"I could feel it, you could tell," Allen said. "Half the time they don't even look at the application. They just look at me. They see that I'm older, and I guess they figure I can't keep up or whatever." Thumbing through her job search folder, Allen said she felt tired.

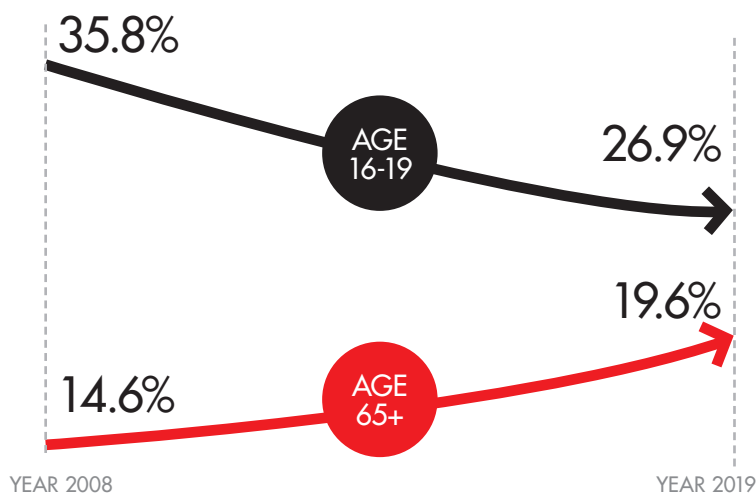
"Because out of all this, somewhere there should've been something," she said. "I'm running out of places. I don't know where else to go."

If she doesn't find a job, she'll have to move in with one of her kids. But she doesn't want to be a burden. And she wants to keep working.

"It's part of making me feel that I'm worth something," she said. "I'm contributing something. I'm not just sitting on my hands waiting for somebody to give me something. Maybe somewhere down the line somebody might see that." □

SENIORS CONTINUED ON PAGE 18

More seniors working



The percentage of teenagers who are working is declining, while seniors are the only age group whose participation in the labor force has increased.

SOURCE: CALIFORNIA EMPLOYMENT DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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