It’s a slim labor market out there. With overall unemployment rates hovering around 9 percent, it’s getting harder for teens to find jobs. The latest teenage unemployment rate is 25.5 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That means more than a quarter of teens who want a job can’t find one.

It’s even harder for juvenile delinquents in the system who were committed in a state facility. These children are often stereotyped and inadequately prepared to get a job and succeed in the community once they return home.

That’s where the Bridging the Opportunity Gap program in Massachusetts comes in.

The program fills a gap in services offered to help connect juvenile offenders with jobs and the education services to train them, two things vital to success, said Christine Kenney, director of Educational Services for the program.

It won a national CSG Innovations award—one of only eight in the country for innovative state programs.

The program funds 14 to 16 other programs a year at $60,000 to $100,000 each and those grantees help plug juvenile offenders into employment services and technical training.

One of the programs filling the gap is at a public vocational high school. There, those in the juvenile justice system are getting a second chance and learning automotive mechanic skills and how to repair an air conditioner, for example.

Through the program, juvenile justice offenders receive 20 hours of career readiness training, participate in an eight-week internship with an hourly stipend, and later move on to a job.

Each year, the program’s numbers are growing. The program grew from 255 participants in 2007 to 295 in the 2009 fiscal year.

In the 2010 fiscal year, 80 percent of the juvenile offenders who enrolled in the program completed it.

But despite the positive signs of success, the economy is still taking a toll on the Bridging the Opportunity Gap program. Not only does a thin labor market undermine job opportunities, but a faltering economy also threatens the program’s budget, according to the Innovations award application.