

Saving Summer Jobs: How Can Summer Youth Employment Programs Improve Youth Outcomes during COVID-19?

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Early work experience — such as that provided by summer jobs — can keep teens out of trouble, improve soft skills, and provide alternative post-secondary pathways for youth. In response, policymakers and business leaders have joined together to create summer youth employment programs (SYEPs) across many U.S. cities. Recent research has demonstrated that SYEPs develop skills among youth that lead to better long-term academic, criminal justice, and employment outcomes. Yet the economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has placed these programs in jeopardy at the exact moment when youth unemployment has skyrocketed.

WHAT ARE SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS (SYEP)?

Initially, the motivation behind many summer jobs programs was to keep youth out of trouble during program hours while improving “soft skills” such as self-efficacy, impulse control, and conflict resolution. Increasingly, policymakers also seek to use SYEPs as a vehicle to provide meaningful employment experiences that can lead to a career or some type of postsecondary education. These programs can be quite large in scale and range in size with roughly 10,000 youth employed each summer through the Boston program to upwards of 75,000 in New York City.

Early work experience—such as that provided by summer jobs—is widely believed to foster positive traits such as independence and responsibility, and teach interpersonal skills that can enhance their future employment prospects and earnings potential — especially for disadvantaged youth. Research shows that even when the labor market is relatively strong, youth who are placed with an employer through the summer jobs program are more likely to work, work more hours per week, and have more meaningful work experiences.

THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH SUMMER EMPLOYMENT

SYEPs have been shown to shape youth behaviors and skills that are important for adult success—such as increasing their college aspirations, gaining job readiness skills and work habits, and improving their community engagement and social skills. Participants shift their academic aspirations towards attending a four-year college and gain good work and organizational habits like showing up on time. SYEP participants also learn how to prepare a resume and cover letter, develop answers to common job interview questions, and practice

interviewing skills with an adult. After program completion, participants are more likely to report that they felt connected to their neighborhood and had a lot to contribute to the groups they belonged to. They also show improvements in knowing how to manage their emotions and temper, ask for help when needed, and resolve peer conflict constructively.

The short-term improvements that occur during the summer are directly linked to long-term improvements in criminal justice, academic, and employment outcomes in the 1-2 years after participating in SYEP:

- Criminal Justice: By providing youth with a set of socially productive activities and /or disrupting delinquent activities, SYEPs can decrease the risk of exposure to, or participation in, violence and delinquent behavior. Research shows that SYEPs decrease both violent crime by roughly 40 percent and property crime by 30 percent among youth after participating in the program. The effects of reducing crime persisted beyond the summer months, suggesting that something beyond keeping youth "busy" during the summer could be at play. Improvements in social skills such as managing emotions, asking for help, and resolving conflict with a peer were correlated with a larger reduction in criminal arraignments for both violent and property crimes.
- Academic: Early work experience provided by SYEPs gives youth the opportunity to engage in tasks that help them develop a sense of agency, identity, and competency with the potential to boost attendance and reduce the likelihood of dropout. Research demonstrates that SYEPs increase school attendance in the year after participation, boosts passing rates for statewide high school exams, and raises the likelihood of high school graduation by 6 percentage points. These improvements appear to be driven increasing aspirations to attend college, gaining basic work habits, and improving social skills during the summer.
- Employment: Labor force attachment at an early stage in one's career typically predicts better labor market outcomes in terms of both employment and earnings later in life. During the year, after participating in SYEP, both employment and wages were higher for African American males age 19-24 years relative to the control group. Employment increased more rapidly among participants reporting improvement in job readiness skills and those reporting they felt "more prepared" for a new job.

SYEPs also offer other advantages to individuals, families, and entire communities. Despite a price tag of roughly \$2,000 per participant, the positive impacts associated with the reduction in crime and the improvements in high school graduation indicate that the benefits of summer jobs programs certainly exceed the costs. Moreover, the impacts appear to be greater for at-risk youth such as those who are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior or have chronically low school attendance. Working across these multiple dimensions, summer job programs can help reduce inequality across youth.

MAINTAINING SYEPs IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

Like all recessions, the economic disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on the employment prospects for youth. The [unemployment rate](#) for youth age 16 to 19 years nearly tripled from 11.0 percent in February to 31.9 percent in April as many businesses that employ youth such as retail, eating and drinking establishments were forced to shut down to reduce the spread of infection. Youth are also less likely to work in industries that have been identified as among the first to re-open—such as healthcare, construction, and manufacturing—making Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) an even more crucial vehicle for employing teens this summer.

Yet city and state governments face both budget steep shortfalls and large logistical hurdles to mounting their summer job programs this year. Given the significant benefits of SYEPs, cities such as Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. are currently [considering a range of options](#) to preserve as much of the summer youth experience for as many youth as possible. In designing these alternative experiences for youth this summer, it will be important for policymakers and practitioners to keep in mind how best to replicate the skills that youth typically gain from having a summer job to ensure improvements in longer-term outcomes for youth down the road.

To employ the same number of youth as last summer, it is likely that SYEPs will need to develop multiple tracks given that no one alternative will be able to be brought to scale or meet the needs of all youth. Moreover, these tracks will need to be flexible depending on what re-opening conditions might unfold. In Boston, here are four possibilities that are currently under consideration:

Earn and Learn: To ameliorate the learning loss from the school year, city leaders are looking into negotiating agreements to enable students to take summer school courses, enroll in college courses for credit, and earn certifications such as Google's IT Support Professional certificate. To be able to move this option forward cities will need to find funding for college courses and/or coordinate with school systems to be able to expand their summer school offerings.

Virtual Internships: To help support companies and community based organizations as they take their summer jobs online, summer jobs intermediaries that match youth with job opportunities are exploring the use of virtual platforms and projects that can be completed by teams of youth under the guidance of a manager or mentor. The ability to supervise youth online and ensure that employment experiences are meaningful are key factors in making this option a feasible alternative to traditional in-person jobs.

Peer-to-Peer COVID-19 Campaign: To educate youth about COVID-19 and safe practices, community based organizations are exploring how to scale-up peer-to-peer marketing programs that engage youth in developing and disseminating public health messages. One of the important aspects of this track will be to provide an opportunity to capture youth voices during the pandemic through photovoice or other methods.

Public Works Program: To provide youth with some in-person options, city leaders are seeking to expand their public works programs to engage youth in helping to maintain parks and other outdoor recreational spaces. Incorporating appropriate social distancing and supervision to ensure the safety of youth and their family members will need to be vetted by public health officials to make this track a viable option. Other alternatives such as employing opportunity youth age 18-24 to help support activities for the 2020 Census and/or contact tracing are also being discussed.

Regardless of the options that cities choose to pursue, keeping youth safe should be the primary focus this summer. An important secondary consideration is to ensure that youth are engaged and developing the skills that have been shown to pay off down the road. Where possible, we should find opportunities to study what youth experience this summer to understand how these alternative tracks affect long-term outcomes. Given that a vaccine is still 12-18 months away from widespread distribution, this learning can help inform summer jobs programs for 2021 and also point to ways in which SYEP can expand even when life returns to “normal”—especially since the demand for most SYEPs exceed current funding levels even in good times.

Finally, let us not forget that SYEPs are also provide important income support for low-income youth and their families. Wages earned from employment in the program can help reduce poverty and provide resources that lead to better long-term outcomes. In Boston, roughly half of youth participating in the Boston SYEP indicate that they help pay one or more household bills and one in five report that they are saving for college tuition. Expanding summer jobs programs during COVID-19 can both provide income to those who most need it as a time when it’s most needed and also invest in future skill development among youth that will continue to pay dividends once we have moved past this current crisis.