

Employment Policies and Programs to Improve Youth Outcomes During the Summer Months
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For the Committee on Summertime Experiences and Child and Adolescent Education, Health, and Safety at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (the National Academies)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Committee with recommendations regarding the opportunities for youth employment policies and programs to promote the healthy development and wellbeing of children and youth during the summer months. First, I discuss the importance of employment for youth outcomes. I then present the evidence to date on the effectiveness of summer youth employment programs (SYEP) on safety, risk-taking, anti/pro-social behaviors, social and emotional development, academic learning, and physical and mental health outcomes of youth. Finally, I provide recommendations regarding specific programs and policies that the committee should consider as a part of its deliberations as well as ideas for combinations of programs and policies with synergistic impacts on youth outcomes.

I. Importance of Employment for Youth Outcomes

Over the past few decades the labor market has become more challenging and competitive as employer expectations for a variety of skills have risen. Post-secondary credentials—whether it be a certificate, an associate degree, or a bachelor’s degree—have become a requirement for many jobs that previously required only a high school degree (Modestino et al., 2014). Employer expectations are also higher for work readiness, communication, and other “soft” skills that are difficult for youth to demonstrate without a track record of work experience (Harrington, Snyder, Berrigan, & Knoll, 2013). Together, these hurdles make it hard for many young people, particularly those with weak school and work records, to enter and move up in the labor market.

Indeed, the prevalence of teen employment has been falling steadily since 2000 with less than one-third of teens aged 16 to 19 years currently employed today (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Over half of unemployed teens report that they are looking to get their first job, suggesting that there may be fewer pathways for teens to enter the labor market (Modestino, et al. 2013). African-American and Hispanic teens—especially those from low income families in high poverty neighborhoods—have experienced the greatest difficulties in finding employment (Sum et al., 2014). Yet early work experience—such as that provided by summer jobs—is widely believed to be an important tool for enhancing the future employment prospects and earnings potential of disadvantaged youth (Bailey & Merritt, 1997; Bishop, 1996; Osterman, 1995; Poczik, 1995).

In response to these trends, policymakers and business leaders have joined together to create summer youth employment programs (SYEP) across many U.S. cities. Initially, the motivation was to keep youth off the streets and out of trouble during program hours while improving “soft skills” such as self-efficacy, impulse control, and conflict resolution—the lack of which have been shown to be predictors of youth violence and delinquency (Lipsey & Derzon, 1998). Increasingly, policymakers also seek to use SYEPs as a vehicle to provide meaningful employment experiences that can lead to alternative pathways for youth—whether it be a career or some type of postsecondary education. This new focus stems from the recognition that one of the major underlying causes of rising racial inequality is the diminished economic opportunity arising from non-white teens being disproportionately located in neighborhoods with few job opportunities, failing schools, and high crime rates (Chetty, Hendren, & Katz, 2016; Wilson, 1996).

II. Evidence to data on the effectiveness of summer youth employment programs

Prior studies of year-round workforce development programs aimed at youth and young adults have provided mixed results. Often these earlier initiatives failed to improve employment without very high levels of investment, suggesting that other interventions could be more effective and efficient at

achieving the same goals (Cave et al., 1993; Bloom et al., 1997; Uggen, 2000; Schochet, Burghardt, & McConnell, 2008; Milenky et al., 2011). When students work too many hours, this ultimately decreases high school graduation and college attendance rates and inhibits later economic success (Mortimer, 2010; Stasz & Brewer, 1999). Indeed, the association between hours of work and school performance follows an inverted-U pattern, with students who work moderate hours performing at a higher level than students who work more or not at all (Stern & Briggs, 2001).

Yet summer jobs programs differ from these earlier programs in several important ways. First, SYEPs primarily serve younger youth who are more likely to still be enrolled in school and less likely to have already engaged in criminal activity. As such, SYEP may act as a preventive measure compared to previous youth employment programs that were targeted at “opportunity” youth who had already dropped out of school and were struggling in the labor market. Second, SYEPs occur in summer months when youth are often idle, reducing opportunities for time that might otherwise be spent engaged in criminal activity. Finally, the SYEPs may incorporate program features—such as a formal career readiness curriculum, greater exposure to private sector employers, and job-skill ladders across summers—that are designed to specifically address deficits arising from a lack of opportunities among at-risk youth.

There are four primary channels through which SYEPs are thought to improve youth outcomes. Although SYEPs have the potential to enhance youth outcomes along several dimensions, researchers have only recently focused on evaluating early work experiences provided by summer jobs programs. These studies typically use an RCT design to compare impacts for youth that were randomly selected into the program to youth that applied but were not selected and have found results that are encouraging. Below I provide the rationale and the evidence for each of these four areas.

A. Safety, risk-taking, anti/pro-social behaviors

Summer jobs programs may “incapacitate” youth by limiting the time to engage in criminal activity or by disrupting “routine activities” that provide likely offenders with suitable targets and a lack of supervision or guardianship (Cohen & Felson, 1979). By providing youth with a set of socially productive activities, SYEPs may decrease the risk of exposure to, or participation in, violence and delinquent behavior (Wilson, 1996).

Three prior studies have examined the impact of SYEPs on crime in different cities and all have shown positive impacts. Heller (2014) finds that participating in Chicago’s One Summer Plus program decreased violent crime for youth in the treatment group by 43 percent over 16 months relative to the control group, with much of the decline occurring during the year after participation. Similarly, Modestino (2018) finds that the Boston SYEP reduces the number of arraignments for violent (-35 percent) and property (-29 percent) crimes among youth in the treatment group relative to the control group during the 17 months after participation. Finally, Gelber, Isen, & Kessler (2014) show that participating in the New York City SYEP reduced the probability of incarceration and mortality from “external causes,” including homicides, suicides, and accidents.

B. Social and emotional development

While the results of the recent SYEP research have demonstrated encouraging results in some cities—particularly for criminal justice outcomes—its utility for policymakers has been limited by the lack of insights into the mechanisms driving these improved outcomes. Although most criminal offending ceases as youth move from adolescence into adulthood (Monahan, Steinberg, & Piquero, 2015), strong, supportive, and sustained relationships with adults and peers are critical to that process (Nagaoka et al.,

2015). SYEPs help develop these relationships by placing youth in jobs that are supported by mentors and program staff. In addition, the types of early work experience provided by SYEPs gives participants the opportunity to engage in tasks that help them develop the sense of agency, identity, and competency necessary for adult roles and success. Some SYEPs, including the Boston program, also offer programming aimed at improving self-efficacy and conflict resolution, behaviors inversely correlated with youth delinquency and violence (Lipsey & Derzon, 1998).

The evidence regarding the impact of SYEP on social and emotional development is mixed. Heller (2014) finds no significant difference in criminal justice outcomes for participants randomly assigned to a social-emotional learning curriculum in Chicago. However, Modestino (2018) fills some of those gaps by evaluating the impact of the Boston SYEP on both short-term behavioral changes in skills and attitudes as well as medium-term criminal justice outcomes to better understand how these impacts are achieved and for whom the benefits are the greatest. She finds that the reduction in crime appears to be linked to improvements in social skills among participants that occur during the summer, as measured by a pre-/post-program survey, and are greater in magnitude for males, older youth, and “at-risk” youth.

Modestino and Paulsen (2018a) also find measurable improvements in social skills and behaviors as well as community engagement. By the end of the summer a greater share of youth reported knowing how to manage their emotions, how to ask for help when they needed it, and how to constructively resolve conflict with a peer. In addition, SYEP participants’ attitudes toward their communities improved greatly during the summer and these outcomes were significantly better than those reported by the control group at the end of the summer. For example, the percent of participants who said that over the past 30 days they always had a lot to contribute to the groups to which they belonged jumped by 15 percentage points. Similar positive improvements were also seen in the share of teens who said they always felt connected to their neighborhood. In retrospect, these large improvements are perhaps not so surprising, given that most SYEP job placements are with community-based organizations in the neighborhoods in which participants live, providing an opportunity for youth to engage in their communities in a positive way.

C. Academic learning

Early work experience can also improve current job readiness skills as well as raise career and academic aspirations—both of which can lead to better long-term academic outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged youth with less access to job opportunities. Greater exposure to employment gives youth experiences that can shape their goals—whether it be to complete high school, obtain career training, or attend college (Duckworth et al., 2007; Heckman, 2008; Lillydahl, 1990; Mortimer, 2010). The Boston SYEP curriculum focuses on developing work-readiness skills such as exploring careers, writing a resume and cover letter, searching for jobs, completing online applications, and interviewing.

In terms of academic outcomes, the impacts of SYEP on youth are somewhat mixed but encouraging. For example, the New York City SYEP is associated with modest improvements in test taking and school attendance, but not high school graduation or college matriculation. Leos-Urbel (2014) finds significant increases of one to two percent in school attendance for the treatment group relative to the control group during the year following participation, with larger improvements for students aged 16 years and older with prior low baseline attendance. Schwartz, Leos-Urbel, & Wiswall (2015) find small but significant increases in the share of SYEP participants taking and passing statewide high school exams relative to the control group. However, other research indicates that the program did not have a positive effect on longer-term academic outcomes, such as graduating from high school (Valentine et al., 2017) or college enrollment (Gelber, Isen, & Kessler, 2014).

Modestino and Paulsen (2018b) also find that the Boston SYEP has a significant impact on improving attendance and test-taking but not on course performance, test scores, or disciplinary incidents. Youth who were randomly selected into the SYEP treatment group experienced significant improvements in reducing unexcused absences (-1.9 days) and achieving an attendance rate of greater than 85 percent (+2.9 percentage points) relative to the control group that provide a meaningful improvement in reducing chronic absenteeism relative to baseline (27 percent). Moreover, these medium-term academic outcomes appear to be linked to improvements in social skills and academic aspirations among participants that occur during the summer, as measured by a pre-/post-program survey, and are greater in magnitude for older and “at-risk” youth.

In a separate paper, Modestino and Paulsen (2018a) show that the Boston SYEP appears to affect college-going plans on the intensive margin rather than the extensive one. While there was no significant change among the treatment group with regards to their plans to attend an education or training program after high school, there was a significant shift towards wanting to pursue a four-year college degree (+4.9 percentage points). This finding is consistent with other research on mentoring that finds having a teacher who graduated from a selective college does not increase the likelihood of low-income students to attend college but does increase the likelihood that a low-income student planning to attend college will apply to a more selective college (Hoxby, & Turner, 2015). The treatment/control group comparisons show an even larger positive impact on college-going aspirations, an indication that the program may have a greater impact on the aspirations of more disadvantaged youth who are less likely to have considered college compared to the more positively selected control group.

D. Physical and mental health

Wages earned from employment in the program can help reduce poverty and provide resources that lead to better physical and mental health outcomes. To date, only one study has assessed the impact of SYEP on health status. Modestino and Paulsen (2018) use the Kutcher Adolescent Depression Scale (KADS) to study how the program affects mental health. During the summer, youth in the treatment group reported significant improvements in two of the five measures, yet even larger improvements were observed relative to the control group across all five measures. Combining the five measures into a depression index, they find that the treatment group was 6.6 percentage points less likely to be diagnosed as depressed compared to the control group. This suggests that the SYEP can serve as a mental health intervention to prevent youth from becoming depressed over the summer, perhaps by providing greater peer interaction.

III. Programs and policies for consideration

A. Expand Summer Youth Employment Programs and provide linkages to additional opportunities

The evidence to date indicates that summer youth employment programs have the potential to reduce delinquent behavior, enhance social and emotional development, enhance academic aspirations and performance, and improve mental health. 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. As a result, major U.S. cities are seeking to establish (Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia) or enhance (Boston, Chicago, New York) their summer youth employment programming.

Yet these efforts are often constrained by a lack of funding, particularly at the federal level. In the early 1990s, federal funding ended on the assumption that in a full-employment economy, employers would hire youth without any government subsidy. Aside from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act,

which has now ended, and a small portion of funding under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, most SYEP funding comes from state and local sources. Some large city mayors pulled together funds from various sources to sustain their programs, recognizing that inner city youth rarely get hired even in the best economic times. But program slots have not been sufficient given a rising minimum wage and growing applicant pools. In Boston, roughly half of those applying must enter a lottery, and among those who do not win program slots, only one in four finds a job on their own (Modestino and Paulsen 2018a).

Despite a price tag of roughly \$2,000 per participant, summer jobs programs yield benefits that exceed costs and also provide other advantages to individuals, families, and entire communities. Unlike year-round undertakings, these programs occur when youth are often idle and not engaged in academic studies or extracurricular activities. Compared to behavioral programs, summer jobs provide experience that can lead to future employment or post-secondary education. And they help low-income families by providing income to teens, of whom one in five contributes directly to household expenses (Modestino and Paulsen 2018). Finally, these programs supply low-cost workers to community-based programs such as summer camps that provide inexpensive daycare for working parents.

However, there are several remaining questions that pertain to different features of the program that are important to answer as practitioners seek to improve summer job programs. For example, it is difficult to tell whether the program's impact stems from learning new skills on the job or through the career-readiness curriculum (or both)—an important distinction for cities such as Los Angeles and Philadelphia that are considering adding similar curricula as a program feature. Future work using alternative sources of random variation within the other Boston SYEP intermediaries to determine which participants receive the career-readiness curriculum may help answer this question. In addition, understanding the intensity needed to produce better outcomes would help cities seeking to utilize their limited funding more effectively to serve the greatest number of youth. For example, a portion of the Boston SYEP funding comes from state sources, which stipulate that only 20 percent of the youth served in any given year can be repeat participants. Additional analyses using historical participation records may be useful for determining the minimum “dosage” (e.g., number of summers) needed to achieve meaningful impacts while also helping to alleviate oversubscribed programs.

Finally, the positive impacts associated with SYEP can lay a strong foundation upon which additional interventions can be layered to achieve more sustained and meaningful outcomes. For example, due to limited funding and capacity, few SYEP participants are able to roll over into year-round employment programs and in fact, their jobs end abruptly at the end of the summer with no chance for continuation. Providing greater linkages between summer and year-round employment programs could enable school-aged SYEP participants (e.g., age 14-18) to continue to build on their positive summer experiences. Similarly, providing older SYEP participants (e.g., age 19-24) with opportunities to apply for full-time work, enroll in community college, or enter an apprenticeship program could reduce the number of opportunity youth who are idle. The latter would fill the gap left by funding cuts to the federal School-to-Work program that was based in high schools and previously provided job placement services and career counseling to non-college bound graduates.

B. Reform youth employment policies and promote youth employment among private-sector employers

Over the past decade there has been a greater emphasis on promoting “college for all”, much to the detriment of vocational and workforce development training aimed at youth. While regulations regarding youth employment are important to ensure safety and prevent exploitation, I would argue that the current laws regarding employment of youth—particularly those under the age of 16—are

overly restrictive. For example, in Massachusetts, state law requires youth under age 16 to obtain a work permit signed by the employer, the child's physician, and the school superintendent. In addition, the limitations on working hours for youth are not well understood among most employers who routinely assume that the school-year restrictions also apply to summertime. As a result, most employers have a written or unwritten rule that they do not hire youth under the age of 16. Meanwhile most 14 and 15-year-olds sit home idle because they are too old for summer camp.

Another way to expand summer jobs programs is to increase private sector engagement by forming new partnerships with employers. The historically tight labor market can provide a window of opportunity for policymakers to promote youth employment. Some employers, desperate for workers, are lowering education and experience requirements and offering training for hard-to-fill jobs (Modestino et al., 2016). Private sector employers are an important part of the Boston SYEP with the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) brokering roughly 70 percent of direct placements in 2017 at firms such as Massachusetts General Hospital, State Street Corporation, Bank of America, Liberty Mutual Group, Vertex Pharmaceuticals, General Electric, Aramark, and Harvard University. PIC specialists prepared students for work through a series of work readiness workshops and career exploration activities during the school year and then matched them with employers based on their interests and skillsets.

What's in it for the employers? In Boston, many employers use their summer programs to help identify students for highly sought-after school-year internships. In these cases, students continue to be paid through a centralized community relations/workforce development budget and work 8 to 12 hours per week in their departments. At other employers, supervisors have been so pleased with their summer interns that they have agreed to pay students directly out of the department budget in order to retain them throughout the school year. Employers are also able to expose a more diverse population to potential careers in their industries.

This should serve as a national model for public-private partnerships aimed at increasing youth employment. Early work experiences provide an important opportunity to build the skills and career interests of any city's future workforce. By providing access to employer networks, career mentoring, and skill development, summer job programs can provide youth with the tools and experience needed to navigate the job market on their own while also expanding the talent pipeline.

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