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Summer Youth Employment Programs Offer More than Just a Summer Job

RESEARCHERS

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Summer Jobs Reduce Violence
among Disadvantaged Youth.
Science, 346, 1219 (2014).*

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What is a Summer Job Worth?
Journal of Policy Analysis and
Management 33, 4, 891-911 (2014).*

Expanding opportunities for youth still in school to work during the summer provide youth not only a wage, but a chance to learn social and soft skills that are valuable in both school and the workforce, such as self-efficacy and impulse control. Engaging students through mentorship, training and paid work is shown to have positive impacts on their behavior, skills and academic performance.

Conversations with researchers Sara Heller and Jacob Leos-Urbel explore two established summer youth employment programs in Chicago and New York respectively, the varied impacts they have had, and the potential for these kinds of programs to expand and improve.

about the programs:



WHAT ARE SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS?

Summer Youth Employment Programs are a way to engage youth during the summer through part time employment along with opportunities for skill development. In the two programs studied here, the average age of participants was 14-21. About 90 percent of the participants in both programs qualify for free and reduced price lunch. Additional characteristics of the participants depended on the outcome the researchers were trying to study. Heller focused on the impact on violence of the participants in the Chicago OSP program. Data show that 20 percent of the participants had previous records of either arrest or victimization. These participants worked for eight weeks in part-time jobs that pay a minimum wage of \$8.25 an hour for 25 hours per week.

The participants of the New York Summer Employment Program (NYSEP) worked for about 25 hours a week for seven weeks in various entry level jobs at private, nonprofit or public sectors. These jobs are funded by various federal, state and local sources. Community Based Organizations (CBOs) are responsible for intake and training of the participants in NYSEP.



about the programs:



WHAT KINDS OF SKILLS DO SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS DEVELOP IN PARTICIPATING YOUTH, AND HOW WERE THESE STUDIED?

Most SYEP programs seem to focus on engaging youth, developing on-site job skills and improving behavior. The focus for the Chicago study was mainly on youth at high risk of violence involvement. The One Summer Plus (OSP) program in Chicago places youth in summer jobs and also offers on-site mentoring and training on social-emotional learning skills (SEL). Youth work in jobs in community gardens or as office assistants. Site mentors work with the youth employees on-site and in small groups, at a ratio of 10:1. All youth received this mentorship and coaching, in addition to the job opportunity itself, and 50 percent of the participants replaced some of the job hours with a formal social-emotional learning curriculum. The outcome was similar for both groups, suggesting that the two types of activities may be interchangeable. Heller hypothesizes that the presence of a mentor or invested employer guiding youth during work hours may teach some of the same skills as the formal curriculum.

The NYSEP places youth in entry level jobs in nonprofit, private, or public sectors such as summer camps, day care centers, government agencies, social and education services. Ten percent of their time is spend on educational training such as financial literacy, career readiness or higher education options. In his study, Leos-Urbel focused on outcomes such as test performance and attendance in order to analyze the extent to which these youth are engaged in learning. Positive experiences during the summer program could help in improving engagement in the following year by building the participants' self-confidence and efficacy. Such issues, although not studied yet could be explored in the future.



HOW WERE THE DATA COLLECTED FOR THESE STUDIES?

With only minor roadblocks, public and community-based resources made access to data relatively simple and cost effective. In both studies, data on participating youth, their job placements, and their key demographics were available through the program's application system. Because these programs select students through a lottery, a natural comparison group of nonparticipating youth is created, further simplifying the research process.

In Heller's study, information about 1634 students between grades 8-12 was gathered to assess the impact of OSP program on youth still in school. Program attendance records were referred to for program participation, Chicago Police Department provided crime related information, and data from the Chicago Public Schools informed longer-term academic and attendance trends. When asked about data challenges, Heller shares, "a lot of the information we use is not public, but the city has been extremely supportive in helping us get data access. Chicago's willingness to share administrative data allowed us do the study at a much lower cost than if we had to go out and survey everyone."

In New York, Leos-Urbel knew that previous research on summer youth employment had found limited increases in reading and math scores and little or no effect on longer term educational and life outcomes. Looking at testing seemed logical: not just test scores but rates of students taking exams, serving as a proxy for academic effort and engagement. It also would follow that by taking more exams, more students will pass more exams.

Urbel studied records for 36,550 students who applied for the NY SYEP in 2007. Like in Chicago, the lottery system and high demand for job placements created a natural, randomized comparison group for study. Information about school attendance as well as math and English regents exam participation and performance were collected a year prior to their SYEP placement and also the following year. "Matching data between agencies who worked with the same participant was a little hard because of different data systems that aren't set up to talk to each other. We relied on identifying participants in each data set by names and birth dates."

impacts of the summer youth employment programs:



BENEFITS FROM BOTH PROGRAMS LAST EVEN AFTER THE PROGRAM ENDED, AND SEEM TO ESPECIALLY BENEFIT HIGH RISK STUDENTS.

In Chicago, Heller found a 43 percent reduction in violent crime arrests over 16 months for participating youth. The biggest impact was seen *after* the program, indicating that merely keeping students occupied during the summer months was not the only factor affecting this reduction in crime. There were no significant changes in other types of crime, nor in schooling outcomes.

In New York, Leos-Urbel found that school attendance of high-risk youth increased up to 4-5 days in the following year among NYSEP participants, and those with the lowest attendance in the prior school year made the greatest gains. Students 16 years or older benefited the most. In terms of academic outcomes, participation in SYEP also increased the likelihood of taking and passing the math and English regents exams, with 128 more students passing in English and 98 passing in math in 2007, because of their participation in SYEP.



SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS PROVIDE ADDITIONAL BENEFIT APART FROM ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OR BEHAVIOR.

Several other studies in addition to the New York and Chicago programs have also found the positive effect summer programs have on development of job skills. The assessment of meaningful youth employment programs found how summer programs improve basic employability and occupational skills. The participants of programs in New York and Chicago also benefitted from supplemental income besides various factors of personal development. The participants were usually from poor backgrounds so this was a huge benefit. Apart from that, job mentors who regularly visit the workplace in the Chicago OSP play a large role in managing conflict in the workplace apart from just teaching basic skills.

Lessons learned and the way ahead:



WHAT DO PRACTITIONERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MAKING THESE PROGRAMS EFFECTIVE?

Heller thinks that there is still a lot to learn in terms of which program elements matter and how to adapt the program to different populations or contexts. She hopes that the many jurisdictions with existing programs will partner with local researchers to study what works and for whom. Other targeted interventions to reduce violent crimes could also be explored by focusing on development of skills such as self-control, social information processing and decision making.

The unique thing about NYSEP is that Community Based Organizations are responsible for administering jobs. The quality of the jobs varies according to the CBO they are involved with. Training and educational opportunities facilitated by the CBOs could also be beneficial to the participants.



WHAT SHOULD POLICYMAKERS KNOW ABOUT THESE PROGRAMS?

Demand for these programs is high, and far outstrips the supply of available job placement. Out of 93,750 applicants in 2007, only 41,650 got placed in various jobs. This is mainly due to lack of funding to create more jobs. Lottery systems are used to keep access to the program fair, but also reduce consistent participation over multiple years.

Many cities have successfully implemented summer jobs programs, suggesting that the basic approach is one that may not be difficult to scale. By focusing on strategies that prevent crime, rather than remediate after the fact, these programs can make a substantial difference, even for a problem as destructive and complex as youth violence. Kids who could go either way seem to benefit more and cost less to serve, compared to kids who are already deep into the juvenile justice system. These kids get an opportunity to make money while improving their job skills, and the result is additional benefits that ripple through society.

Cost and benefit analysis further indicates the value of these programs. The cost of the program in New York amounts to \$50.4 million, but it's important to remember that the majority of the costs incurred are wages that go directly to youth and their families, providing critical income assistance, with many additional benefits. When looking at the impact on attendance, the small improvements are a significant chunk of what determines whether students will be promoted to the next grade. Beyond providing youth with their first formal employment, this work experience is often critical for helping them build a work history and get their next job. Having something productive to do during the summer makes sense; for teens, they want to work and make money during this time, and structured SYEP programs offer a chance to include positive youth development skills that help them succeed in school and future jobs.

RESEARCHERS CONTINUE TO EXPLORE ASPECTS OF SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS AND WHAT MATTERS MOST.

In all cases, finding more job sources would help meet the overwhelming demand for these programs and job placements. Researchers want to explore in more depth the factors that actually make a difference, such as the type of work students are assigned to, the dosage and consistency of the work, and whether the participants maintain their relationship with the CBOs after the program or not. Finding such outcomes will depend on a multi-year analysis of factors by matching and data sharing between CBOs and comparing participants with non-participants. Further study is also needed to explore the impact of such programs on student attitude and self-esteem.

Studies of similar programs in new cities will help researchers explore new dimensions of these kinds of work experiences and how outcomes relate to different target population characteristics. As cities continue to make these critical investments in young people, researchers can continue to uncover exactly what works, for whom and how long the benefits last.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL SUMMER LEARNING ASSOCIATION

The National Summer Learning Association is the only national nonprofit exclusively focused on closing the achievement gap by increasing access to high-quality summer learning opportunities. NSLA recognizes and disseminates what works, offers expertise and support for programs and communities, and advocates for summer learning as a solution for equity and excellence in education. NSLA's work is driven by the belief that all children and youth deserve high-quality summer learning experiences that will help them succeed in college, career, and life.



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