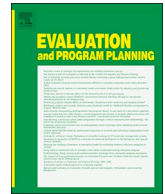




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Reducing inequality summer by summer: Lessons from an evaluation of the Boston Summer Youth Employment Program

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ABSTRACT

Many U.S. cities have implemented Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) with the hope of improving long-term behavioral, academic, and economic outcomes among program participants, particularly inner-city, low-income, and non-white youth. While recent empirical studies show positive impacts for some outcomes, little is known about program mechanisms and the potential to reduce inequality across groups. Using an embedded randomized control trial, this study evaluates improvements in short-term outcomes for the Boston SYEP based on survey data collected for both treatment and control groups during the summers of 2015, 2016, and 2017. Participants reported increases in community engagement and social skills, job readiness skills, and college aspirations that were significantly different from the control group. In most cases, the largest gains were observed for non-white youth suggesting that the program may have the capacity to reduce inequality across groups. Our hope is that this article will serve as a resource for those seeking to understand how summer jobs programs work and for whom, and to use these findings to strengthen and target the SYEP intervention. We also provide practical lessons learned regarding the development and deployment of our survey instrument to both the treatment and control groups among the youth population.

1. Introduction

As of 2015, upwards of 5.6 million youth ages 16–24 in America were not employed or in school (Schultz & Schultz, 2015). Although some have called this a “lost generation,” the White House Council for Community Solutions identified this group as “Opportunity Youth” based on the belief that with the right support and training, they can positively contribute to their communities and society more broadly. Failure to engage and employ this population can have costly negative implications for both individuals as well as society. According to a recent report funded by the Social Science Research Council, the cost of youth disconnection — including health care, public assistance and incarceration — was \$26.8 billion in 2013 alone (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2013).

Although concern for disconnected youth has grown in the wake of the Great Recession, 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’s 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 and Dennett, 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). Moreover, with rising income inequality, the positive impact of early work experience on earnings is likely to have increased as the return to “skill” has risen

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(Oettinger, 1999).

In response to these trends, policymakers and business leaders have joined together to create summer youth employment programs (SYEP) in a number of 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).

This recent expansion of SYEPs is often justified with various theories stemming from the positive impact of early work experience on the economic, academic, and behavioral outcomes of youth as well as the enhanced impacts for inner-city low-income and minority groups. Indeed, prior studies find that labor force attachment at an early stage in one’s career predicts better labor market outcomes later in life (Baum & Ruhm, 2014; Carr, Wright, & Brody, 1996; Painter, 2010; Ruhm, 1997; Sum et al., 2014). In addition, greater exposure to employment has also been shown to provide youth with experiences that can shape their aspirations, whether it be to complete high school, obtain career training, or attend college, potentially raising academic achievement (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Heckman, 2008; Lillydahl, 1990; Mortimer, 2010). Finally, early work experience, such as that provided by SYEPs, also provides youth with strong, supportive, and sustained relationships with adults and peers as well as the opportunity to engage in tasks that help them develop a sense of agency, identity, and competency—both of which have been shown to reduce delinquency and promote behaviors that are necessary for adult roles and success (Kautz, Heckman, Diris, Weel, & Borghans, 2014; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998; Nagaoka, Farrington, Ehrlich, & Heath, 2015).

Although SYEPs have the potential to enhance youth outcomes along several dimensions, only a handful of studies have evaluated such programs in a rigorous manner. Thus far, the literature has focused on long-term outcomes captured by administrative data on criminal activity, academic achievement, and employment and earnings. For example, research on summer jobs programs in Chicago and New York City found that SYEPs can reduce violence (Heller, 2014) as well as the probability of incarceration and mortality by “external causes,” which includes homicides, suicides, and accidents (Gelber, Isen, & Kessler, 2014). Other studies find that participation in the New York City SYEP is also associated with modest improvements in test taking and school attendance (Leos-Urbel, 2014; Schwartz, Leos-Urbel, & Wiswall, 2015), but not college matriculation (Gelber et al., 2014). Finally, two studies have explored the link between SYEPs and subsequent employment and earnings but neither found a sustained positive relationship (Gelber et al., 2014; Sachdev, 2011). While the results of this research have demonstrated encouraging results in some cities—particularly for criminal justice and academic outcomes—a limitation of this work has been a lack of information on the mechanisms driving these improved outcomes. In addition, it’s not clear whether SYEPs have the potential to reduce inequality across different racial and ethnic or otherwise disadvantaged groups.

This paper presents the results from a pre-/post-program survey of the Boston SYEP, the first part of a larger multi-year evaluation study based on an embedded randomized control trial. With its inception in the mid-1990s, the Boston SYEP has grown into a national model bringing together city, state, and private funding of nearly \$10 million per year. Each summer, the program employs about 10,000 youth aged

14 to 24 with roughly 900 local employers. The program is administered by four intermediaries that contract with the City, two of which make use of random assignment because the program is oversubscribed, providing a robust control group. In addition, the Boston SYEP has several features that are designed to specifically address deficits among at-risk youth by providing formal career readiness instruction, greater exposure to private sector employers, and job-skill ladders across summers.

This purpose of the survey was to assess improvements in short-term outcomes affected by the Boston SYEP during the summer based on data collected from the both the treatment and control groups. Our goal was to provide a look inside the “black box” as to how SYEPs affect teens over the course of a summer to better understand the mechanisms at work that might explain the subsequent improvements in longer-term outcomes documented by prior studies. Specifically, we hypothesized that the Boston SYEP improves social behaviors, academic aspirations, and job readiness skills during the summer that may be linked to reductions in crime, increased school attendance and test scores, and higher rates of employment down the road. In addition, we further hypothesized that the Boston SYEP intervention may serve as a potential lever to reduce inequality among youth by having a greater impact on African-American and Hispanic teens.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

We build on the existing literature in several fundamental ways to shed light on not only on “what works,” but on what works for whom, under what conditions, and why by focusing on the following research questions:

- Do Boston SYEP participants experience improvements in short-term outcomes during the summer including social skills and community engagement, academic aspirations, and job readiness skills?
- Are the impacts on participants significantly different from the control group?
- Do these outcomes vary for different demographic groups by age, gender, and race/ethnicity?

To explore these questions, we make use of an embedded randomized control trial to assess the short-term program impacts of the Boston SYEP. We do this in two ways. First, we compare outcomes before and after the program for the treatment group to provide an upper bound on the impacts achieved over the summer. Second, we compare outcomes for the treatment group and the control group at the end of the summer to confirm the value added by SYEP versus other factors that affect the normal course of youth development. We also measure how these short-term program impacts vary across different subgroups to help target specific program elements and allocate resources more efficiently. Our goal is to help policymakers understand the degree to which SYEPs increase the acquisition of various skills. This knowledge can shed light on which program mechanisms are responsible for improving longer-term outcomes for youth and suggest which program features should be replicated when bringing the program to scale.

2.2. Intervention

During the summer, participants work a maximum of 25 hours per week for a six-week period from the beginning of July to mid-August and are paid the Massachusetts minimum wage. Students may be placed in either a subsidized position (e.g. with a local non-profit, CBO, or city agency) or a job with a private-sector employer. In addition, the Boston

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