

Letters of Recommendation for Youth Employment in the United States

Sector(s): Labor Markets

J-PAL office: J-PAL North America

Sample: 70,000 youth

Target group: Job seekers Students Urban population

Outcome of interest: Dropout and graduation Employment Mortality Sentencing and incarceration Crime

Intervention type: Information Social networks

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0002771

Partner organization(s): New York City Department of Youth and Community Development

Recent studies have found that summer youth employment programs (SYEPs) can reduce youth rates of violent crime, incarceration, and premature death. However, these studies do not find evidence that SYEPs lead to improvement in employment outcomes after the program on average. In this project, researchers are working with SYEP employers to create personalized letters of recommendation for SYEP participants to evaluate the impact of recommendation letters on participants' educational and employment outcomes after the program.

Policy issue

For at least the past few years, youth employment rates in the summer—when teenagers are most likely to be working—have hovered at or near a sixty-year low.¹ Research indicates that employment during adolescence and young adulthood affects employment and wages for decades.² Early work experience is generally associated with better future employment outcomes, potentially because it develops skills, a job history, and connections to employer networks.³ Recent randomized studies in Chicago, and New York City suggest that, while SYEPs have reduced rates of violent crime among youth, the programs have had limited measurable effects on educational attainment or later employment, on average.

It is possible that SYEPs do not improve future employment outcomes because there is a mismatch between employers' beliefs about SYEP participants and participants' actual skills. For example, employers might screen out SYEP participants before the interview stage because they may not understand what youth learned in SYEPs, may discriminate against those who participate in SYEPs, or may have more negative beliefs in general about youth who may be likely to participate in these programs. Researchers will look at the impact of providing employers with additional information on youth participants via personalized letters of recommendation from their SYEP employers. Researchers can then determine whether providing better information to employers improves future labor market outcomes for program participants. Since youth are also encouraged to show their letters of recommendations to teachers and guidance counselors, researchers are also investigating youth educational outcomes.

Context of the evaluation

Researchers partnered with New York City's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), which runs the country's largest SYEP. The program provides New York City youth with up to six weeks of paid employment in July and August.⁴ Anyone between the ages of 14 and 24 who lives within the five boroughs of New York City and meets the work eligibility requirements

can apply. Participants work in entry-level jobs in a variety of industries. The study sample was limited to a subset of SYEP participants who had both youth and employer contact information on file, which totaled approximately 56,000 youth in 2017, in addition to about 14,000 youth from a 2016 pilot who will also be included in the study.

Details of the intervention

Researchers are conducting an evaluation to determine the impact of providing letters of recommendation to SYEP participants on employment and education outcomes. Youth were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups of equal size.

SYEP employers of youth in the study were asked to complete a survey about a randomly-selected subset of their youth employees. For every youth in the treatment group who received a positive “overall” rating and sufficient positive ratings on other dimensions, the research team generated a letter of recommendation using the employer’s responses. Each letter included details of the work placement as well as a description of the youth’s specific strengths. Youth were then sent electronic and hard copies of the letter and were encouraged to use the letter in future job applications and to show letters to teachers and guidance counselors.

Additionally, the research team distributed a job posting to a subset of SYEP participants, which allows them to measure the impact of the letters of recommendation on SYEP participants’ job-seeking behavior by observing the application rate. It also allows them to observe the percentage of youth in the treatment group who used the letter of recommendation in their job applications.

In order to determine the effects of providing youth with a positive letter of recommendation on labor market outcomes, researchers are examining youth outcomes in existing official records on employment outcomes over a three-year follow-up period, as well as educational outcomes.

Results and policy lessons

Study ongoing; results forthcoming.

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1. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2018. “Employment and Unemployment Among Youth - Summer 2018.” News Release. Accessed October 29, 2018. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/youth.pdf>
 2. Kahn, Lisa B. 2010. “The long-term labor market consequences of graduating from college in a bad economy.” *Labour Economics* 17, no. 2: 303–316; Neumark, David. 2002. “Youth labor markets in the United States: shopping around vs. staying put.” *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 84, no. 3: 462–482; Oreopoulos, Philip, Till von Wachter, and Andrew Heisz. 2012. “The Short- and Long-Term Career Effects of Graduating in a Recession.” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 4, no. 1: 1–29.
 3. Mroz, Thomas and Timothy H. Savage. 2006. “The Long-Term Effects of Youth Unemployment.” *Journal of Human Resources* vol. 41, issue 2; Ruhm, Christopher J. 1995. “The extent and consequences of high school employment.” *Journal of Labor Research* 16, no. 3: 293–303.
 4. New York City Department of Youth & Community Development. 2018. “Jobs & Internships: Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP).” Accessed October 29, 2018. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dycd/services/jobs-internships/summer-youth-employment-program-syep.page>