Reducing Inequality through a Summer Youth Employment Program in Boston

Sector(s): Crime, Violence, and Conflict, Education, Labor Markets

Location: Boston, MA, United States

Sample: 4,083 youth

Target group: Urban population Youth

Outcome of interest: Empowerment Aspirations Social cohesion Socio-emotional development Soft skills

Intervention type: Employment

Research Papers: Reducing inequality summer by summer: Lessons from an evaluation of the Boston ...

Partner organization(s): Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD), Boston Mayor's Office of Workforce Development (OWD)

In 2015, 5.6 million young people in America were neither employed nor in school. Black youth were more likely than their white counterparts to be unemployed, exacerbating racial inequities. Summer youth employment programs (SYEPs) offer a promising solution to increase youth employment opportunities and improve equity. Researchers used survey data to evaluate short-term outcomes for Boston's SYEP participants in 2015. They found that the program significantly improved participants' community engagement and social skills, many job readiness skills, and some academic aspirations. These effects were continued in the 2016 and 2017 SYEP cohorts. The largest gains were observed for Black and Latino/a youth, suggesting the potential of SYEPs to reduce racial inequities.

Policy issue

In 2015, 5.6 million young people in America were neither employed nor in school. Black and Latino/a teens experienced the greatest barriers to finding employment, particularly those living in low-income neighborhoods. This inequity exacerbates the racial unemployment gap, in which structural factors such as hiring discrimination and mass incarceration have led to a Black unemployment rate that is consistently double the white unemployment rate.[1]

Early work experience is widely believed to be an important tool for increasing employment later in life, possibly by providing youth with experiences that can shape their aspirations and connecting youth with role-model adults. Summer youth employment programs (SYEPs) provide such experiences and may address underlying causes of racial inequity by providing economic opportunity early in life.

While randomized evaluations have shown a decrease in criminal legal involvement during and after participation in SYEPs, less is known about why these effects occur. Improvements in social, academic, and job readiness skills may all be linked to these long-term impacts. Furthermore, there is relatively little known about if and how SYEPs address inequities for Black and Latino/a youth.

Context of the evaluation

The Boston Mayor's Office of Workplace Development operates a city-wide SYEP. In 2015, 2016, and 2017, the program aimed to connect approximately 10,000 youth each summer with employment for six weeks. Youth in the program were paid the state

minimum wage to work for up to 25 hours per week at local employers and receive an additional twenty hours per week of job-readiness training. The job-readiness curriculum was designed to support youth with both practical job skills (e.g., resume and cover letters) and non-technical skills such as conflict resolution and communication. Employers were a combination of private companies, non-profits, and city agencies.

All Boston residents between the ages of 14 and 24 were eligible to apply to SYEP. Youth applied through local intermediaries under contract with the Mayor's Office, like Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD) with whom the researchers partnered for this project. Due to the high number of applicants, ABCD used a random lottery system to select youth for participation in the program.



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Details of the intervention

Researchers assessed the impact of Boston's 2015 SYEP on social behaviors, academic aspirations, and job readiness skills.

To assess these impacts, researchers analyzed self-reported survey results from SYEP participants and comparison group participants, taken after the summer. SYEP participants filled out the survey at a higher rate (66.9 percent) than those in the comparison group (21.8 percent). This difference in survey take-up rates, and potential bias in who completed the survey, likely resulted in an underestimation of the program's true impact.

Researchers also estimated whether participants were impacted differently due to their age, gender, and/or race. Researchers then leveraged surveys from 2016 and 2017 to understand if the measured impacts were similar across other cohorts of SYEP participants.

Results and policy lessons

In 2015, Boston SYEP participants reported higher levels of community engagement and social skills, job readiness skills, and college aspirations than those in the control group. In most cases, the largest benefits were observed for Black and Latino/a youth, suggesting that the program may have the capacity to reduce inequality. These effects were also seen across the 2016 and 2017 cohorts.

Community engagement and social skills

SYEP participants were more likely than peers in the comparison group to report being connected with their neighborhoods and communities, as well as improved social skills.

The percentage of SYEP participants who reported feeling that over the past thirty days, they always had a lot to contribute to their community was 13.8 percentage points higher than the comparison group (42 percent from a baseline of 32.8). SYEP participants also reported feeling more connected to their neighborhoods, an increase of 12.9 points relative to comparison group participants (54 percent from a baseline of 23.9).

The share of SYEP participants that reported knowledge of how to resolve a conflict was 13.6 percentage points higher than the comparison group (48 percent from a baseline of 28.6) and knowledge of how to ask for help when needed was 11.6 percentage points higher (31.2 percent from ae comparison baseline of 37.1 percent).

Job readiness

Participants gained job readiness skills, such as application and interview preparation, throughout the summer.

A larger percentage of SYEP participants reported that they had prepared a resume (an increase of 18.4 percentage points, 36 percent from a baseline of 51.7) and a cover letter (an increase of 19.3 percentage points, 78 percent from a baseline of 24.5) than the comparison group. Improvements were also observed in the percent of SYEP participants who had practiced interviewing skills with an adult (an increase of 5.2 percentage points, 9 percent from a baseline of 59.6) and developed answers to typical interview questions (an increase of 4.6 percentage points, 6 percent from a baseline of 72.5).

Improvements in social skills and interview preparedness were seen exclusively by Black male youth. Black male youth who participated in SYEP were 16.2 percent more likely to report knowing how to handle their emotions than their peers in the comparison group. They were also 13.3 percent more likely to report knowing how to resolve a conflict. They were 11.1 percent more likely to have developed answers to interview questions and 11.8 percent more likely to have practiced interviewing with a result.

Future aspirations

Participation in SYEPs altered participants' views of future aspirations, often towards an increased focus on academics.

The percentage of SYEP participants indicating that they planned to work in the fall was 9.4 percentage points less than comparison group participants (16 percent from a baseline of 57.3). Researchers posit that this decrease may point to a key benefit of SYEPs: they may enable youth to increase the time and attention they can devote to academics during the school year.

SYEP participants were significantly more likely to want to pursue a college degree. The percentage of participants reporting that they wanted to attend a four-year university was 8.1 percentage points (12 percent from a baseline of 64.9) than the comparison; the percentage reporting they want to attend a two-year university increased by 5.6 percentage points (82 percent from a baseline of 6.8).

Black and Latina female youth saw large and significant increases in academic aspirations to attend college. Both Black and Latina female youth were 17 percent more likely to plan to attend a four-year college or university than peers in the comparison group and Black young women were 9 percent more likely to plan to attend a two-year college.

Results over time

These results remained fairly stable across the 2016 and 2017 cohorts, particularly when controlling for observable

characteristics.

Results from these surveys provide important information on the short-term benefits of SYEPs and offer insight into how and why SYEPs impact long-term outcomes for youth.

Modestino, Alicia Sasser and Richard J. Paulsen. 2019. "Reducing inequality summer by summer: Lessons from an evaluation of the Boston Summer Youth Employment Program." Evaluation and Program Planning, 72: 40-53

1. Ajilore, Olugbenga. 2020. “On the Persistence of the Black-White Unemployment Gap.” Center for American Progress. February 24, 2020. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/persistence-black-white-unemployment-gap/