

The Importance of Summer Youth Employment



Background

Summer is a critical time for engaging youth as schools are closed. Without structure, youth can become disconnected. Disconnection has been identified as a major driving factor among youth getting involved in criminal activities. A lack of vocational opportunities enhances the vulnerability of at-risk youth to engage in criminal behavior.

Collaboratively, coordinated employment and training programs designed for summer have been recognized to have a positive long-term impact on youth by providing them with positive social and emotional engagements in pursuing potential career paths and achieving their personal aspirations.

Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEP) aim to create resources and opportunities for them by collaborating with employers of various disciplines -- financial institutions, not-for-profit organizations, and public and private sectors -- to further help youth in gaining experience, networking, and securing employment.

According to a recent study by the Wallace Foundation, a national philanthropy organization, COVID-19 added to these adverse impacts by further reducing opportunities for engagement in academic, athletic, cultural and work activities. They also found that positive outcomes of summer youth employment programs were achieved by adopting a structured and coordinated network approach.

Rationale and adoption of Summer Youth Employment Programs

According to a report from the Social Science Research Council's Measure of America, while disconnection rates went down from 14.7% to 10.7% between 2010 and 2019, the pandemic had caused the disconnection among 16-24 years old youth to rise to 9 million by May 2020. The report highlights the inequitable impact of escalation in disconnection by suggesting that the most adverse impact of lack of schooling and lower employment opportunities will be borne by people of color and economically deprived groups.

A lack of training and mentoring, sometimes due to a lack of financial resources, can lead to the risk of delinquency among youth and can explain the motivation behind crime to an extent.

Recognizing that creating learning platforms is a critical step toward prevention and mitigation of juvenile crime, the Federal government's Employment and Training Administration developed a program to create opportunities for youth employment through programs like the Workforce Pathways for Youth (WPY) program that focuses on expanding job training and workforce activities for youth.



In addition, the Wallace foundation initiated a National Summer Learning Program in 2011 in various districts – Florida, New York, Boston, and others. Other SYEP programs have become prevalent across the nation within the last decade. Strategies and approaches of SYEP may shift across different cities in the U.S., yet all have a common vision behind establishing the program. Boston's SYEP started in 2010 serving 232 students. Continuous expansion of the program led to the involvement of 14,000 students in a variety of summer programs in 2019. Similarly, Dallas initiated a summer training program in 2008. It served 68,303 students in 2019, across 2,735 programs.

In Connecticut, the Summer Youth Employment & Learning Program (SYELP) of the North Central Connecticut workforce region had 1,125 students enrolled in 2021. As with the national programs, Connecticut's programs also focus on offering career exploration opportunities and paid work experience for youth between the ages of 14 and 24. There are several providers with distinct programs that facilitate the development of not just workplace skills but also broad life skills including critical leadership skills among the participants. One such program organized by the Town of Bloomfield offers participants with skills to prepare resumes and cover letters as well as develop interviewing skills. A similar program offered by the Blue Hills Civic Association for young participants in North Hartford helps build a wide range of skills, including financial literacy, and customer service, computer literacy, critical thinking and problem solving, Interpersonal Communications, and decision-making skills among others.

Capital Workforce Partnership has led the formation of several partnerships across the State of Connecticut among various organizations, like Our Piece of the Pie, East Hartford School Business Partnership, Human Resources Agency of New Britain, and Center for Latino Progress, among others. These programs have shown exemplary collaborative work across education institutions, businesses, not-for-profit agencies, and community organizations in guiding students towards their academic, professional, and personal success, as well as helping secure paid employment.

Recently, for expanding the capacities for summer learning and for creating a wider range of opportunities for youth, The American Rescue Plan funds were available to educational and community organizations to spend on summer out-of-school programs.

In addition, over \$3 million has been allocated by various agencies including Department of Labor, Department of Children and Families, Department of Aging & Disability Services, among others, with each department focusing on various populations to serve youth with different needs.

Structure of Summer Youth Employment Programs

Eligibility for youth participating in the program varies from state to state and within a state as well. Youth with the greatest needs are targeted and prioritized for exploring the benefits of these programs, including low school attendance and performance, low-income communities, homeless youth, youth with physical or mental disability, marginalized populations, and other vulnerable young individuals.

Summer youth employment programs are meant to not only keep the targeted population engaged but also provide them with meaningful earning opportunities and respectable wages. According to the Capital Workforce Partners (CWP), while pay rates vary across jurisdictions, most participant salaries range between \$12 to \$14 according to various criteria including, age, education work experience, and type of vocational activity being undertaken.

SYEP covers vocational domains to develop various learning capabilities and professional skills among youth. Skills frame-

works outlined in summer learning programs often focus on personal as well as professional skills, including creativity, critical thinking, teamwork, social awareness, communication, coding, technology, dance, theater, recreation, etc. Some include specialized programs for teaching financial literacy and developing financial competencies

Impact of SYEP and challenges

According to research published by the Wallace Foundation in 2011, assessments of SYEP have shown promising outcomes for the program. In one of the evaluation studies of summer learning programs, it was found that summer educational and vocational training greatly helped youth in academic subjects like mathematics and other reading subjects, and in developing skillsets and social-emotional competencies. A 2019 evaluation study of the Summer Youth Employment and Learning Program for the city of Albany, conducted by the State University of New York, Albany concluded that SYELP participants were 66% more likely to graduate from High School than non-participants. The study concluded that "...SYEP participation had a greater effect on graduation rates for students residing in the target neighborhoods...". Based on the participant survey results, the study concluded that 79% of participants felt they developed at least one academic skill from the group of several skills including critical thinking, problem-solving, and time management among others. Many of the participants felt that the program advanced their employment preparedness by supporting workplace skills development. Overall, the participants' satisfaction rates for work experience and for general participation were found to be in the mid-90 percent range. Employer surveys also indicated a high level of satisfaction with professional and personal skill development outcomes.



Additionally, according to a 2017 report by the Urban Institute, collaboration with various employers -- financial institutions, not-for-profit organizations, and public and private sector -- further helps youth in gaining experience, networking, and securing employment. Youth securing meaningful employment in the job market may also lessen their dependence on others or by unlawful means, thereby decreasing their chances of involvement with the criminal justice system.

While there are various advantages of developing SYEP, there remain some challenges that impede the expansion of learning opportunities. The main hurdle in the successful implementation of the program is the lack of funding and lack of coordination among various stakeholders engaged in youth services. For instance, there is a lack of enough state and federal funding for financing these summer employment programs. An additional challenge lies in the lack of awareness of these programs among disadvantaged youth. Greater outreach to make these programs visible and accessible needs additional financial and human resources. While significant progress has been made in making the juvenile justice system more restorative, there are still hurdles in rehabilitating and re-engaging young ex-offenders in academic and employment opportunities.

Another challenge seems to be the inequality in the opportunities for people of color. The State of Connecticut's Department of Labor report and data suggests that currently, over 40,000 youths of all races in the age group of 16-24 are disengaged from work and school. The same report highlights while underprivileged youth from all the races suffer disconnection, the percentage of disengaged BIPOC youth is the highest, which spiked to 50% in 2020.

A major opportunity lies in expanding public-private partnerships to address youth employment and promoting equity in summer youth employment opportunities.

Looking at the future

SYEP not only enhances awareness among youth about potential career pathways, it also provides a firsthand opportunity to observe professionals in their working environments.

Summer Youth Employment Programs are supported by assessment and evaluation studies, and thus, it continues to improve by incorporating the recommendations suggested by research institutions including Wallace Foundation, Federal and State government reports, various community organizations, and academic institutions studies.

Efforts are made to deliver quality services and optimize the usage of resources. Government and other community partners strive to adopt holistic approaches to adequately create diverse opportunities for youth to develop their skillsets.

Various partners in SYEP programs including schools, educational institutions, law enforcement agencies, businesses, legislators, and community organizations, are all continuously working to expand the scope of the program not only in terms of covering a spectrum of domains but also by increasing the capacities for a larger number of youth to participate in the program.



Summer Youth Employment Programs and efforts are bringing substantive positive change in improving individual lives and building stronger communities. It is an opportunity to bring the best out of the youth population-- our true future. It opens the doors for youth to see the best in themselves, as they grow to add value to the society by being responsible citizens and leaders in their communities.

This Issue Brief has been authored by Doctoral Student Jasmine Kaur at the University of New Haven.

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