

Summary: **Saving Summer Jobs: How Can Summer Youth Employment Programs Improve Youth Outcomes during COVID-19**

Boston Summer Jobs Overview

Dr. Alicia Sasser Modestino, Research Director at the Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University's School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs, started the webinar by presenting on the Boston Summer Jobs Program, from its history to how it adjusted for COVID-19 and what they learned from the experience. Modestino shared statistics, charts, and graphs describing Boston's summer youth employment program's (SYEP) impact. Youth unemployment increased much more dramatically than adult unemployment during the pandemic. As of March 2021, youth unemployment was thirteen percent, down from its spike of thirty-one point nine at the start of the pandemic. Clearly, Summer Youth Employment Programs are as valuable as ever.

Starting in the 1990s, Boston has employed 10,000 youth ages 14-24 with roughly 900 local employers each summer. Participants work no more than twenty-five hours a week for six weeks from July to mid-August and earn Massachusetts minimum wage. Participants must be placed with a local community-based organization, non-profit, or private sector employer. Participants receive twenty hours of training using a hands-on, competency-based, work readiness curriculum developed by the Commonwealth Corporation. Based on surveys by the program, half of the youth employed by this program help support their families; thus, the money they earn is significant to them and their families.

COVID-19 drastically changed SYEP. There were steep budget shortfalls and large logistical hurdles to conduct programs during the pandemic shut-downs. Many cities including Chicago and New York cut funding to programs. Boston's Summer Jobs Program decision-making team is spread out among various departments and include corporations that offer jobs to the students participating in the program. The William T. Grant Foundation currently funds a multi-year evaluation of the Summer Youth Employment Program in partnership with the City of Boston. Starting in 2015 this cumulative study had three main objectives. Firstly, to compare experiences of youth in the treatment group relative to the control group to determine impact on criminal justice, academic, and economic outcomes. Secondly, to link self-reported survey data to administrative records to determine how behavioral changes during the summer lead to improvements in longer-term outcomes one to two years later. Lastly, to disaggregate impacts to learn if SYEP reduces inequality across SES and racial/ethnic groups.

This research has found that Boston's Summer Jobs Program has reduced crime through the fostering of community engagement and soft skills. This was linked to a thirty-five percent reduction in violent crime and a twenty-nine-percent fall in property crime. This program raised academic achievements through aspirations and work habits. It was linked to a four-percentage point increase in high school graduation rates due to better grades and attendance. Lastly, the program boosted employment through job readiness. It is linked to a nine-percentage point increase in employment and a thirty-percent increase in wages during the year following participation for opportunity youth of color ages 19-24.

Boston decided to invest an additional \$4.1 million during Summer 2020 to support four new tracks that allowed youth to safely engage in meaningful activities. The Summer Jobs Program was offered in:

1. Public Work Programs, which focused on being outdoors and making outdoor spaces hospitable to Bostonians;

2. Peer-to-Peer COVID-19 Campaign, which sought to help use youth to fight dis- and mis-information about COVID-19 especially in BIPOC communities;
3. Learn & Earn, which was by the far the most popular, had over 1,200 applicants for 500 available spots, and provided youth an opportunity to continue their academic studies and fight learning loss, experience a college curriculum, and earn money; and,
4. Virtual Internships, under which the city worked to support businesses in turning their internships virtual so students could have maximum access to opportunities throughout the city. The virtual internship track was developed by professors at Northwestern University.

Modestino discussed the climate under which these tracks came about, citing that had they opted for only virtual programming, Boston would have lost about forty percent of the job opportunities typically available to students. Additionally, research from the Boston Public Schools found that about 1 in 20 students were no longer logging into online learning. Those who worked to develop last summer's programming did so specifically with that last statistic in mind, thinking about ways they could increase student engagement in the program. One of the benefits of the virtual internships was more opportunities that were better compared to students' specific interests. Social work and community centers, Small and Medium-sized Businesses and non-profits, and public health Institutions were the three sectors of the virtual internship program. Each sector mapped out a path for an internship to mirror the school's curriculum that was flexible to the individual jobs assigned to the youth. In many ways, even with soft skills and work habits, this virtual set up was comparable to in-person internships. Eighty percent of youth rated their experience as good or very good. While there is always room for improvement, this was incredibly successful for a first-year program.

Their post-program research found that both the virtual internship and Learn & Earn provided similar, and in some ways, superior experiences compared to traditional in-person jobs. Success was judged by students' engagement 16-25 hours a week, students being matched with a quality internship based on skills and interests, and students' likelihood to consider a related career. Students in the college and internship tracks were more likely to consider a related career and have programming that matched their skills and interests. The overall experience was incredibly comparable between the groups.

Modestino, next spoke specifically about the Learn & Earn track because it was brand new to the program. Of the students who received spots in the program, most had never taken a college course. Eighty-eight percent completed, seventy-eight percent passed, and ten percent were more likely to enroll in college than the control group.

Lastly, Modestino addressed how other cities could replicate the success of Boston's program. Other cities can use this model to engage youth and to be more intentional about improving authenticity and equity. When asked to estimate the cost to scale the program nationwide, Dr. Modestino replied with an investment similar to the one made under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act on 2009, or roughly \$1.5 billion, with one-hundred percent of the investment allocated spent on youth summer jobs. Youth have been left out of COVID-19 relief and funding, and this type of program could drastically support them in the next summer. She also noted that the Brookings Institution's research affirms her cost analysis.

Student Panel

In the next section of the webinar, **Rashad O. Cope**, Director of the Department of Youth Engagement & the Employment, City of Boston, moderated the youth panel. In his introduction to the panel, he discussed the uniqueness of Boston's Youth Summer Employment Program because Boston's approach to decision-making includes strong support from the state government, the mayor, and the cabinet chiefs. Each leader has prioritized opportunities for young people by allocating city operational dollars to support SYEPs and fund the opportunities within the department that provides both summer and school year support.

Cope mentioned intermediaries, including Boston Pick, ABCD, MLK Scholars, and Youth Options Unlimited who manage and navigates the funds from the state, city employers, and philanthropy to collectively pour into Boston's overall goal to provide summer jobs programming to young Bostonians. To pull off Summer 2020, Boston led a coordinated effort that consisted of seven primary areas: intermediary planning meetings; a summer jobs partner survey; the creation of the summer jobs track; community listening sessions with young people, parents, and partners; community webinars; virtual hiring and payroll process; and the creation of youth employment guidance documents to make sure that health and safety drove every decision.

Q: What job opportunities did you participate in and why is having a summer job important to you?

Nancy spoke first detailing her first job as a painter for Artists for Humanity in the summer of 2019. Since it was before the pandemic, it was an in-person job. This year she participated in the Learn & Earn Career Development programs where she took a virtual class at the Urban College of Boston. She described it as being very different from her first experience, both because of the pandemic and how the program was structured. In her work with the college, she had the opportunity to study the history of immigrants in Boston as well as engage in college and career training courses for job readiness and financial education. She enjoyed being able to save up money for college and to have an outlet to keep her busy during the summer, especially with quarantine limiting her ability to engage with the world.

Joseph first engaged with the program in the summer of 2016 with Boston Centers for Youth and Families in Shelbourn. He spent two summers there before aging into the YMCA position, where he worked for two years as well. This last summer he also participated in the Learn & Earn track. His biggest takeaway from his positions was the opportunity to engage with what "real-world" jobs are like. He talked about how when he was younger, supervisors would "baby" him and he would get paid for just sitting around. With his jobs through the Summer Youth Employment program, he had an experience that helped him to feel more prepared for when he entered into the workforce full-time. He also enjoyed his weekly workshops where, as a senior in high school, he had lots of opportunities to discuss preparing for college and learning about student loans and other college access topics.

Q: Tell us more about navigating youth jobs during COVID-19. How did the world of virtual and hybrid differ from "normal" in-person jobs you experienced previously? What benefits did you experience?

Joseph spoke about how the application process changed, specifically becoming more extensive because of COVID-19. He felt stressed because he was not sure he was going to get placed, much less be placed in his top choice. His teacher helped him with the application process because she knew how important having a summer job was for him, both so that he could stay busy, but also so he could have money to spend throughout the school year when he couldn't work as much. He also recognized that those

working to make the program successful did so by making sure he had all the information necessary, including deadlines so that he could ensure his application was successful.

Nancy also got her first pick for the program. She described feeling overwhelmed when the program first started because, while she had done school virtually for a while at that point, she had never had a virtual job. She expressed gratitude for how well organized this brand-new program was mentioning that engaging in the program was not confusing at all. She also appreciated not having to spend \$30 a month on transportation to her work site and the time flexibility of working remotely. She was grateful for the opportunity to learn about financial literacy and career development. Some of what she learned included resume building, interviewing, and applying for and managing loans.

Q: How has Boston's program helped you consider your college or post-secondary plans? And what paths have you explored as a participant?

Nancy, who is going into her senior year of high school, plans on attending a four-year university. She applied to Boston University, Northeastern, and Tufts University. Currently, she is considering a career in medicine. The program helped her feel more ready for entering the next stage of her development by helping her feel confident in her application skills. She also valued being able to learn about different career paths through her summer jobs as a painter and a historian. She loved the wide breadth of options available to Boston youth through the program.

Joseph stressed how, over the years in this program, he has been able to grow out of being shy and quiet and grow into being confident in himself and his skills. He will be attending Bates College in Maine this Fall. He was particularly grateful for his mentor, a college student who guided him through Learn & Earn and was available for any questions he might have.

Q&A Session with All Panelists

Q: Can you talk about the Logistical Obstacles, like connectivity issues and others, and how they were mostly overcome to implement the programs?

Cope spoke about the value of the surveys they conducted. These surveys were designed both to understand capacity and potential challenges anticipated by stakeholders in the program. Technology was by far the biggest concern. Part of why the city of Boston signed on to an additional \$4.1 million for the summer jobs programming was so that money could be funneled into providing youth with Chromebooks and hotspots as needed.

Modestino added that questions about technology were deliberately added to the pre- and post-surveys specifically to chart how effective this program was at filling the gap. While many students received Chromebooks for the summer from the Boston Public Schools, there were still some youth who were disconnected. On top of that, there were struggles students faced that were universal, like finding a quiet place to connect and how to engage with a supervisor they never met in person. This was part of the reason behind developing the program with ready-made projects to make it easier for youth and employers to connect virtually.

Q: What are your thoughts on youth virtual burnout?

Nancy spoke about how “Zoom school” was definitely draining but that she felt driven to make this last summer before college count, and she thought the program helped meet her where she was and supported her in her goal to be productive during the summer.

Joseph talked about the incentive of money, and there was a general chuckle from the panelists as they acknowledged that money is also an incentive for adults. He was particularly grateful for the way SYEP filled in the COVID-19 induced boredom of sitting around the house all day and watching TV.

Q: How do we market these programs?

Joseph emphasized the importance of utilizing social media, especially Instagram. It was an online ad in addition to his teacher that helped connect him to the program. His second point was that teachers are a valuable resource. High school teachers know what their students need, and if they are aware of these types of programs, they will push the students who can most benefit to engage in the programs.

Nancy talked about the importance of meeting youth where they are. Not a lot of high school students are in the habit of checking their emails. For Nancy, checking her email was the difference between her and her friends partaking in the program. A lot of her friends didn’t know about it until it was too late.

Q: What strategies do you have in place to keep employers in place? Could you tell us more about the readymade projects?

Modestino highlighted the readymade projects as being critical to keeping employers engaged in the program despite COVID-19. She also discussed that part of the justification for sending out the first surveys was to make sure that working with students over the summer was on the radar of businesses, so there would be time to plan accordingly. Having multiple tracks allowed for employers to engage in the way that was best for them. Additionally, the support of the mayor to get the private industry onboard was incredibly helpful.

Cope spoke to the deep commitment of community partners, specifically non-profits and CBOs whose missions revolve around supporting the youth of Boston and the general community. They didn’t have to work very hard to incentivize employers to participate; they simply had to listen and adapt the program to make it manageable.

This event summary was written by Taylor Cole, AYPF Policy and Research Intern Spring and Summer 2021