

STOPPING A BULLET WITH A SUMMER JOB

Summer youth employment programs that provided minimum wage summer jobs to mainly disadvantaged youth in New York City and Chicago reduced arrests for violent crimes, incarceration, and premature deaths.

Featuring evaluations by Jonathan M.V. Davis, Alexander Gelber, Sara B. Heller, Adam Isen, and Judd B. Kessler



PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO CRIME LAB

KEY RESULTS:

Summer jobs programs reduced violent crime. Participating in Chicago's One Summer Chicago Plus (OSC+) nearly halved the number of violent crime arrests among program participants. Participating in New York City's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) reduced the likelihood that youth would be incarcerated in New York State prison or would die prematurely.

Summer jobs programs provided employment to youth who would otherwise have difficulty finding a job. Only about thirty percent of the youth not offered a slot in SYEP successfully obtained a paying summer job from elsewhere. Youth who participated in SYEP had higher earnings during the program year than their counterparts not offered a program slot.

Youth who participated in summer jobs programs did not have higher employment or earnings after the program year. The SYEP program did not cause any future increase in earnings. In fact, while participation in SYEP increased the probability of having a job in the year after the program, participation led to slightly lower earnings (about \$100 each year) for three years after the program. Chicago's OSC+ program neither clearly increased nor decreased average earnings during the year after the program summer.

The violence-prevention impact of summer jobs extended beyond the program summer. In Chicago, the bulk of the decline in violence occurred after the program ended, and in New York City, the reduction in death rates continued over a number of years after the program summer. The timing of these declines suggests that these programs changed participants' behavior, rather than merely prevented youth from engaging in violence by keeping them busy on the job.

Every day in the United States, more than 150 people die from acts of violence, and more than 6,000 people suffer violence-related injuries. Youth are twice as likely as adults to both commit and suffer from violent acts.

Many scholars and community activists have connected violence to joblessness. Joblessness might increase an individual's likelihood of engaging in violence by weakening social ties, increasing stress, making criminal activity appear more attractive, or by making youth feel that they would have less to lose if punished. However, implementing youth employment programs that reduce violence in a cost-effective way, or that meaningfully improve long-term employment prospects, has proven difficult. Some programs have reduced crime but required such long and expensive interventions that the benefits did not outweigh the costs. Other programs have had no effect on crime. Still others have even increased juvenile criminal activity. In most of these programs, any improvements in employment prospects dissipate within a few years after the program ends.

However, three recent studies have found that summer youth employment programs can be both effective at reducing youth violence and relatively inexpensive. Summer youth employment programs commonly place qualifying youth, often from low-income families, in a part-time, minimum-wage job with a local government agency, community organization, or business for the summer. Youth may also receive mentorship, life skills training, or other services. Cities, with the help of state and federal grants and local philanthropic support, subsidize the wages of the participants. As of 2015, each of the fifty most populous cities in the United States had offered a summer youth employment program in the last five years.

In New York City, researchers Alexander Gelber (University of California, Berkeley), Adam Isen (U.S. Department of the Treasury), and Judd B. Kessler (University of Pennsylvania) conducted a randomized evaluation of the city's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), which held a lottery to determine who was offered a job. In Chicago, researcher Sara B. Heller (University of Michigan) conducted an initial randomized evaluation of the city's One Summer Chicago Plus (OSC+) program and a replication and extension study with Jonathan M.V. Davis (University of Chicago).



EVALUATIONS

New York City Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP):

SYEP is the largest summer youth employment program in the United States. From 2005 through 2008 (the program years studied), SYEP provided summer jobs to more than 30,000 youth per year at an annual cost of approximately \$59 million. Youth across the city between 14 and 21 years old who met work eligibility requirements could participate in the program. SYEP placed participants in entry-level jobs and paid them the minimum wage for working up to 25 hours per week for up to seven weeks. Community-based organizations provided participants with approximately 17.5 hours of workshops over the course of the summer on job readiness, career exploration, financial literacy, and continuing their education beyond high school.

The program received 294,100 qualifying applications during the study period, which was around double the number of jobs available. Participation was determined by an initial lottery, followed by subsequent lotteries to fill the slots of any initial winners who did not prove their eligibility or failed to enroll in the program. Applicants could re-apply in subsequent years, regardless of whether they had previously participated in the program. The program cost about \$1,400 per participant (about \$1,463 in 2017 dollars).

Researchers analyzed administrative program records, tax records from the Internal Revenue Service, incarceration data from the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, and cause of death data from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to study the impact of SYEP on employment, earnings, college enrollment, incarceration, and mortality.

AN AT-RISK POPULATION

Most applicants to these summer jobs programs came from disadvantaged backgrounds, and applicants were predominantly minorities. More than 90 percent of applicants to OSC+ received free or reduced price lunch, and applicants lived in neighborhoods where a third of households live below the poverty line and unemployment averages nearly 20 percent. Applicants to SYEP had average family income levels that were about half the national average. In 2012, more than 20 percent of the OSC+ applicants had been victims of crime and about 20 percent of the OSC+ applicants had been previously arrested. In 2013, 47 percent had been previously arrested. Nearly all of the OSC+ applicants and about half of the SYEP applicants were black.

One Summer Chicago Plus (OSC+): A summer youth employment program run by the city of Chicago, OSC+ places youth in entry-level jobs and pays them the Illinois minimum wage for six to eight weeks. Researchers conducted one randomized evaluation of OSC+ in 2012 and another in 2013.

In 2012, 1,634 youth aged 14-21 from thirteen Chicago high schools with high rates of violence applied for the program, and there were fewer available slots than applicants. By random lottery, 730 applicants were offered slots in the program and 904 were not. Half the program participants were offered 25 hours per week of paid employment, while the other half were offered fifteen hours per week of paid employment and ten hours per week of social and emotional learning programming (for which the youth were also paid the hourly minimum wage). The social and emotional learning programming was based on cognitive behavioral therapy principles and aimed to train youth to manage aspects of their thoughts, emotions, and behavior that might interfere with effectiveness in a job setting.¹ Adult mentors, who served about ten students each, provided employment-related guidance to all participants. The program cost about \$3,000 per participant, including wages paid to participants, (about \$3,100 in 2016 dollars).

The 2013 OSC+ program allowed out-of-school youth to apply and limited applicants to male youth, in order to study effects for youth disconnected from the education system and to target the program more clearly at violence reduction. About 41 percent of applicants were referred directly from the criminal justice system; the rest were recruited from an applicant pool for broader summer programming in Chicago. In 2013, 5,216 young men ages 16-22 applied. By random assignment, half were assigned to the treatment group or a waitlist for this program. The treatment group was offered summer jobs plus a social-emotional learning curriculum, with invitations to additional structured activities throughout the following year) or a waitlist for this program. Half of the applicants assigned to the control group.

Researchers matched OSC+ records from the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services to administrative records from the Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Police Department, the Illinois State Police, and the Illinois Department of Employment Security to measure the impact of the program on academic outcomes, arrests, and employment.

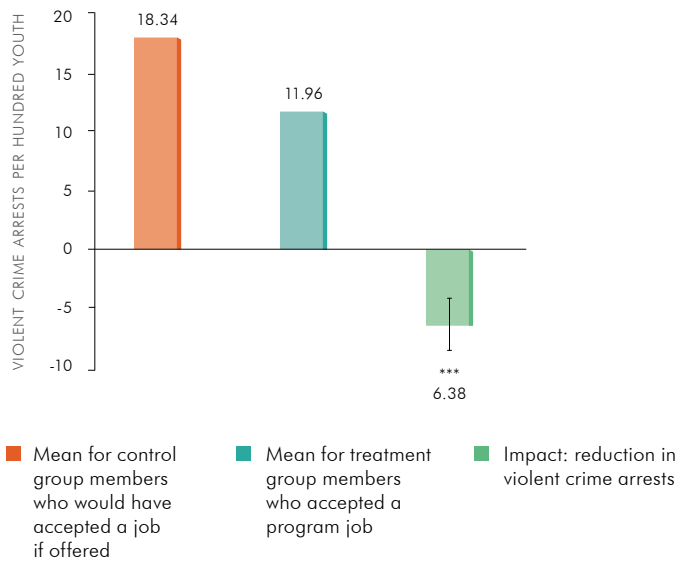
¹ For more on cognitive behavioral therapy, see the J-PAL Policy Bulletin, “Practicing Choices, Preventing Crime.” <http://bit.ly/2r4aDDC>

RESULTS

CRIME AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Summer jobs programs reduced violent crime. Across the 2012 and 2013 cohorts, participating in OSC+ reduced the number of violent crime arrests one year after random assignment by 6.4 arrests per 100 youth,² from a baseline of 18.3 arrests per 100 youth (a 35 percent reduction). The bulk of this decline occurred after the program ended. The 2012 program had a similar impact on both participants who were offered 25 hours of work per week and participants who were offered 15 hours of work plus 10 hours of social and emotional learning programming per week. Considering both the 2012 and 2013 cohorts, participation in OSC+ seemed to increase property crime arrests over two years by 5.8 per 100 youth from a baseline of 12.7 (a 45 percent increase), although these results were less clear than the reduction in violent crime. OSC+ did not cause significant declines in arrests for other nonviolent crimes.

FIGURE 1. SUMMER JOBS REDUCED ARRESTS FOR VIOLENT CRIME



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistically significant difference relative to the comparison group is noted at the 1% (***), 5% (**), or 10% (*) level.

Participants in summer jobs programs were less likely to serve time in prison. SYEP participation between 2005 and 2008 reduced the probability that youth would serve time in prison by 2013 by 0.10 percentage points, a 10 percent reduction from the baseline incarceration rate of 0.99 percent, which translated into 112 fewer youth imprisoned. A decline in the incarceration of males accounted for the bulk of this reduction.

Summer jobs programs saved lives. As of 2014, SYEP participation between 2005 and 2008 caused a decline in mortality of 0.073 percentage points, an 18 percent reduction from a baseline mortality rate of 0.41 percent, saving 83 lives. The reduction in deaths was concentrated among young men.

FIGURE 2. SUMMER JOBS REDUCED INCARCERATION AND MORTALITY



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Statistically significant difference relative to the comparison group is noted at the 1% (***), 5% (**), or 10% (*) level.

UNDERSTANDING THE RESULTS

Since program job offers were allocated by random assignment, researchers could attribute any differences seen between the youth offered jobs and those not offered jobs purely to the effect of the program job offer. Only about 73 percent of those offered summer jobs in New York actually accepted the job (and provided the documentation of eligibility necessary to accept the job). In Chicago, 75 percent of students offered a job in 2012 accepted the job and participated. The recruiting process in Chicago followed a shorter timeframe in 2013 and thus several youth were offered spots in the program for each job that was available (with the understanding that not all youth would accept the job offers). Given that there were fewer jobs than youth who were offered jobs in 2013, the maximum program take-up rate was 38 percent. Thirty percent of the youth accepted the job and participated. Researchers therefore distinguished the effect of being offered a job (known as the intent-to-treat effect) from the effect of accepting the job (the treatment-on-the-treated effect). The effect of accepting a job is particularly policy-relevant because the number of applicants actually employed largely determined program cost, and the slots of applicants who did not accept jobs could be given to other applicants.

RESULTS

EMPLOYMENT AND EARNINGS

Summer jobs programs employed youth with limited access to other jobs but had little impact on employment after the program year. During the program year, SYEP participation increased the probability of having a job by 71 percentage points, which means that less than 30 percent of those not offered a program slot were able to find paying work elsewhere. Besides a small effect in the year after the program summer, SYEP participation did not help youth find jobs in subsequent years. Considering the 2012 and 2013 cohorts, the OSC+ program increased formal employment by 85 percentage points from a baseline of 12 percent (a 700 percent increase) during the program summer but did not increase employment after the program summer.

Summer jobs programs provided substantial income to youth during the program year but slightly depressed earnings in the following several years. Participants earned an average of \$1,085 through SYEP. Participating in SYEP reduced income from other sources besides the program itself by an average of \$209 during the program year, which translated into a net increase in earnings of \$876. In each of the three years after the program, the program reduced earnings by about \$100. On average across the 2012 and 2013 years, the OSC+ program increased earnings by about \$1,000 during the program summer but had no effects on earnings later that year and in the following year.

EDUCATION

Summer jobs programs did not have large impacts on educational outcomes. Researchers found no evidence that SYEP participation increased the likelihood that youth would enroll in college or that OSC+ participation increased school attendance or grade point average.

UNDERSTANDING THE RESULTS CONTINUED

This effect of accepting a job can be thought of as the difference in outcomes between someone who was offered a program job and accepted it and someone who was not offered a program job but would have accepted a program job, had they been offered one. This effect is not reflective of youth who would have somehow secured a program job regardless of whether they won the program lottery, although there were very few of these youth.



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

² As described on page 4, the results described in this section are “treatment-on-the-treated” effects, which estimate the impact of actually participating in these programs, rather than being offered a program slot. The control means shown are estimated averages for those who would have participated had they been given the opportunity to do so.

POLICY LESSONS

Summer jobs programs offer considerable promise to alleviate the social costs of youth violence. Summer jobs programs in two major US cities have been found to decrease arrests for violent crime, reduce incarceration, and save lives. These impacts were achieved at a cost of a few thousand dollars per participant—much lower than many other youth employment programs. The drop in violent crime for the OSC+ program accrued for a year before remaining steady, consistent with data showing that youth in the group eventually reached an age where they are less likely to be involved in criminal activity. Given these patterns, this program may achieve violence prevention in a critical period of elevated risk. Researchers estimate that the social benefits from the reduction in violence from the OSC+ program may be nearly six times larger than the program's costs. Although the OSC+ program did not reduce nonviolent crime, and researchers found suggestive evidence of an increase in property crime, it is not uncommon for interventions to impact violence—which by nature involves conflict—differently from other crime outcomes.

Summer jobs programs have succeeded where other youth employment programs have not. A key difference from other youth employment programs that have been less effective is that SYEP and OSC+ run in the summer, when youth are not likely to be otherwise employed or in school. These two programs are able to reach youth before they have dropped out of school. Only very costly and intensive youth employment programs have been able to reduce crime among “disconnected youth,” who are neither working nor attending school.

These jobs programs may teach youth valuable social-emotional skills that last beyond their participation in the program.

Participating in OSC+ had a similar impact, regardless of whether youth received explicit social and emotional learning programming, suggesting that social-emotional skills were learned equally well “on the job.” Through a summer job, youth may be able to improve their self-control, processing of social information, and decision-making. If summer jobs programs merely kept youth busy during the summer, the bulk of the violence reductions should not have occurred after the programs ended.

More work needs to be done to improve the employment prospects of disadvantaged youth. Largely consistent with other youth employment programs, researchers found no evidence that summer jobs programs helped youth get jobs in the future, earn higher wages, or achieve meaningfully better academic improvements. Although summer jobs did not impact future earnings and employment on average, researchers found evidence suggesting that the employment effects of the program varied for different youth. Future research could explore how summer jobs may benefit employment for particular subsets of youth.

Featured Evaluations: Davis, Jonathan, and Sara B. Heller. “Rethinking the Benefits of Youth Employment Programs: The Heterogeneous Effects of Summer Jobs.” No. w23443. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2017.

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