

Summary

Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEP) are believed to improve the economic, academic, and behavioral outcomes of the population they serve, particularly for inner-city, low-income, and non-white youth. As part of a larger evaluation, we collected survey data on participants in the Boston 2015 SYEP. These participants reported additional job readiness skills, higher academic aspirations, and more positive attitudes towards their communities compared to the control group. Overall, these trends are encouraging, particularly because the largest gains were observed for minority youth. It remains unclear whether these short-term improvements will result in sustained advantages down the road. In the second phase of our evaluation, we hope to tackle this question by linking the survey responses reported in this brief to administrative data from employment, academic, and behavioral records, to better articulate the long-term effects of SYEP.

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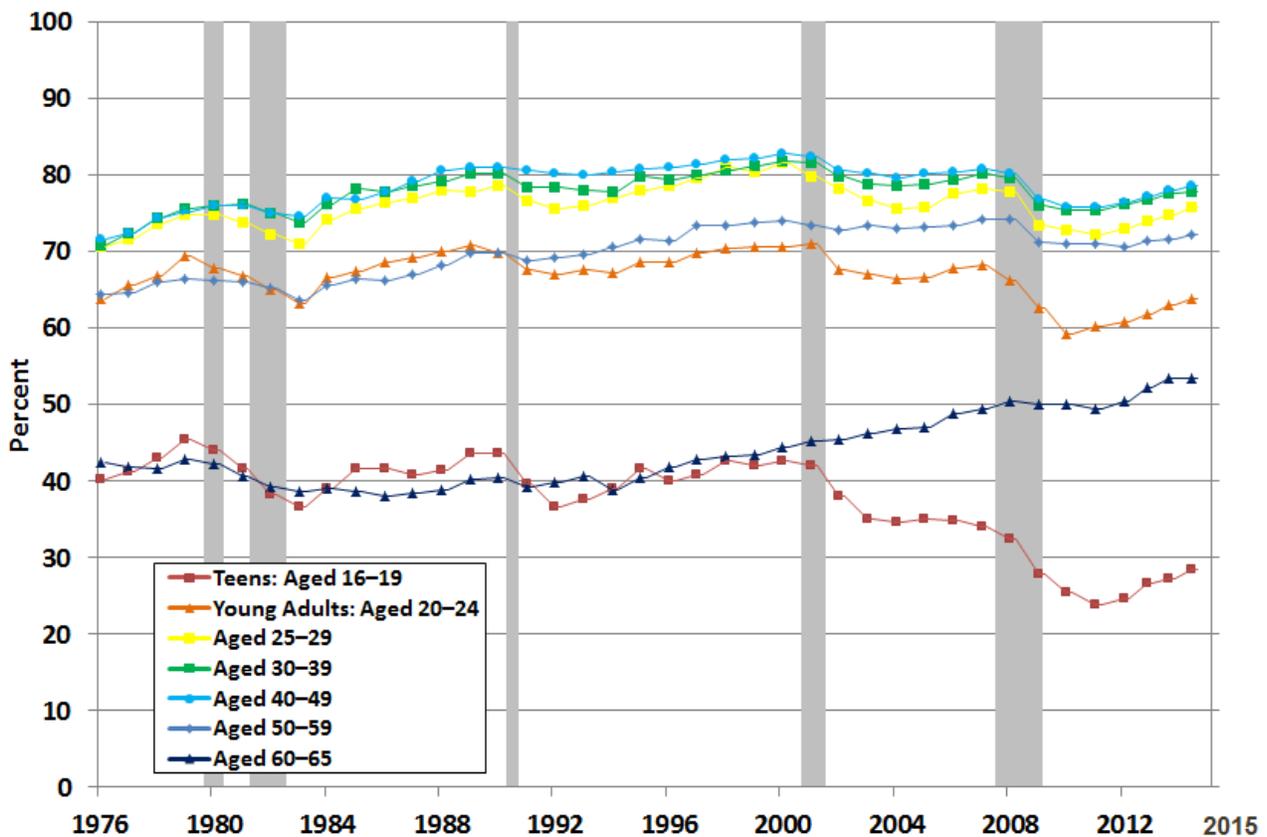
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Introduction: The current state of the youth labor market

Early work experience is widely believed to be an important tool for enhancing the future employment prospects and earnings potential of disadvantaged youth (Bailey, 2010; Osterman, 2006; Poczik, 2010). However, teen employment has been falling steadily since 2000. Less than one-third of teens aged 16 to 19 years are currently employed today (see Figure 1) and over half of the unemployed teens report that they are searching for their first job, suggesting that fewer pathways exist for teens to enter the labor market (Dennett & Modestino, 2013). In particular, African American and Hispanic teens—especially those from low-income families in impoverished neighborhoods—experience the greatest difficulties in finding employment (Sum, Khatiwada, Trubsky, & Ross, 2014).

Figure 1
U.S. employment-to-population ratio by age group, 1976–2015



Source: Author's calculation from the Current Population Survey.

In response to these trends, policymakers and business leaders across the country have joined together to create summer youth employment programs (SYEP) to improve the labor market outcomes of low-income and minority inner-city youth. By placing teens in subsidized jobs with government agencies, non-profit organizations, and private sector employers, SYEP have the potential to improve employment prospects for participants by providing them with the tools and experience needed to navigate the job market on their own. This brief seeks to demonstrate the short-term benefits of SYEP while also highlighting the need for further research to better understand the program's long-term impacts on youth.

Why study summer jobs programs?

Summer jobs programs are often justified with various theories stemming from the benefits of early work experience on the economic, academic, and behavioral outcomes of the youth that they serve, many of which posit greater impacts for inner-city low-income and minority youth. Advocates also point to the direct income support that SYEP provide to low-income youth (and their families) through wages earned by being employed in the program. The main arguments are explored in detail below.

Boosting employment through job readiness

Although little is known about the impact of summer jobs, research based on working during the school year suggests that moderate levels of teen employment (less than 15 or 20 hours per week) may have beneficial effects on future employment, particularly for disadvantaged youth with less access to job opportunities.¹ Through SYEP, youth have the opportunity to explore potential careers, develop relationships with adult mentors, and practice both work-related and soft skills.

¹Typically, studies find that labor force attachment at an early stage in one's career predicts better labor market outcomes later in life (Carr, Wright, & Brody, 1996; Painter, 2010; Ruhm, 1997). Conversely, unemployment at a young age has adverse effects on wages up to ten and twenty years later (Gregg & Tominey, 2005; Mroz & Savage, 2006). Yet, others contend that teen employment is not a determining factor in later labor market success, citing selection effects and the pre-existing characteristics of teens who work versus teens who don't (Bacolod & Hotz, 2006; Hotz, Xu, Tienda, & Ahituv, 2002).

Raising academic achievement through aspirations

When youth combine school and work in reasonable balance, they tend to put more effort into academic achievement.² This may be especially true for students who struggle with the traditional in-school curriculum. Greater exposure to employment gives youth experiences that can shape their aspirations, whether it be to complete high school, obtain career training, or attend college, potentially raising academic achievement (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Heckman, 2008; Lillydahl, 1990; Mortimer, 2010). Work experience may also provide an opportunity for teens to explore and test school-based knowledge, possibly increasing comprehension with practical applications. However, others believe early work experience can harm academic performance—primarily when students work too many hours during the academic year—ultimately decreasing high school graduation and college attendance rates and inhibiting later economic success (Mortimer, 2010; Painter, 2010; Stasz & Brewer, 1999).

Reducing delinquent or criminal behavior through social engagement

Some assert that employment provides youth with a set of socially productive activities, possibly decreasing the risk of exposure to, or participation in, violence and delinquent behavior (Heller, 2014). From the perspective of youth development researchers and practitioners, youth need activities that enable them to develop the sense of agency, identity, and competency necessary for adult roles and success. Strong, supportive, and sustained relationships with adults and peers are critical to that process (Nagaoka, Farrington, Ehrlich, & Heath, 2015). Additionally, workplace-based programs that teach non-cognitive skills appear to provide disadvantaged youth with discipline and guidance, which is often missing at home or in school (Kautz, Heckman, Diris, Weel, & Borghans, 2014). Moreover, most SYEP participants are placed with nearby community-based organizations (CBOs), providing opportunities for youth to engage with their communities in a positive way.

Despite the rationales provided above, little is known about the specific effects of summer youth jobs programs on long-term outcomes, or how those impacts might be achieved

² The association between hours of work and performance in school appears to follow an inverted-U pattern, with students who work moderate hours performing at a higher level than students who work more, or not at all (Stern & Briggs, 2001).

Some might argue that we have set the expectations too high for what can be achieved during a single summer. Moreover, implementing such programs requires braiding together different funding streams, soliciting commitments from employers, and matching teens to jobs at the start of each summer—a formidable logistical challenge. And for the most vulnerable youth, it’s unclear whether a summer job experience is a powerful enough intervention to measurably improve their long-run prospects. Research can illuminate how SYEP affect youth in both the short and long term, guiding intermediaries as they look to enhance their programming efforts, and informing policymakers seeking to expand opportunity for all youth.

Evaluating the Boston Summer Youth Employment Program

During the summer of 2015, we launched a formal evaluation to assess the Boston SYEP intervention as a strategy to improve the labor market outcomes of low-income and minority inner-city youth. Introduced in the mid-1990s, the Boston SYEP has become a model program for the nation. It relies on city, state, and private funding (totaling nearly \$10 million, annually) to connect about 10,000 city teens each summer with roughly 900 local employers. During the summer, teens work a maximum of 25 hours per week for a six-week period. Students may be placed in either a subsidized position (e.g. with a local non-profit, CBO, or city agency) or a job with a private-sector employer, arranged by one of four intermediaries under contract with the City of Boston.

During the course of our evaluation, we will measure the effect of this early work experience on employment, academic achievement, and behavioral outcomes. Only a handful of studies have evaluated such programs in a rigorous manner, and results have been mixed.³ Previous studies have been limited to assessing basic program impacts.⁴ We are interested in learning not only what types of outcomes to expect from the Boston SYEP, but also how these outcomes are achieved and for whom the benefits are the largest.

³ Two studies of the New York City SYEP found that the program increases subsequent employment and wages during the participation year while decreasing the probability of mortality and incarceration (Gelber, Isen, & Kessler, 2014) but with little impact on academic outcomes (Schwartz, Leos-Urbel, Silander, & Wiswall, 2014). In contrast, the District of Columbia’s SYEP was found to reduce “employability” after the program ended (Sachdev, 2012).

⁴ An evaluation of the Chicago One Summer Plus program found that crime fell by 43 percent over the following 16 months after the program ended (Heller, 2014).

In doing so, we make use of a mixed-methods approach that combines self-reported survey data on short-term program effects with administrative record data on long-term outcomes. The survey data measure changes in job readiness skills, post-secondary aspirations, and social engagement during the summer, while the administrative record data measure subsequent employment, academic achievement, and criminal activity after the program has ended. In this brief, we focus on what we have learned so far from our survey during the summer of 2015. Specifically, we measure changes in the survey responses over the course of the summer for individuals who were randomly selected to participate in the Boston SYEP (treatments) and compare them to the outcomes of applicants who were not randomly selected (controls).⁵ Using this approach, we aim to answer the following research questions:

- Does the Boston SYEP positively impact job readiness skills, academic aspirations, and community engagement among participants?
- Do these outcomes vary for different demographic groups by age, gender, or race/ethnicity?
- Are the impacts on participants significantly different from those of a control group?

The findings from the survey data can help practitioners and policymakers to establish best practices and allocate resources more effectively.

Survey results from the summer of 2015

During the summer of 2015, we collected survey data from one of the intermediaries that implement the Boston SYEP.⁶ The survey covered a range of topics, including demographic characteristics, job readiness skills, academic aspirations, and social engagement. Participants in the treatment group were surveyed both at the beginning (pre) and the end (post) of the summer, while non-participants in the control group were surveyed only at the end of the summer (post) due to program constraints. While this does not allow us to compare changes over time across the two groups, we can still measure (1) changes over time for the participants and (2) how participants ranked relative to the non-participants at the end of the summer after

⁵ The intermediaries that implement the Boston SYEP typically receive more applications than the number of SYEP jobs available. As such, roughly 60 percent of the spots in the program are randomly allocated to applicants by lottery.

⁶ These results are drawn from Modestino and McHugh (2015).

the program ended. Thus we can explore whether the program positively impacted the treatment group during the summer, and whether the post-measurements of these impacts were significantly different from those in the control group.

The treatment and control groups were randomly selected for participation in the program, but the response survey rates of the two groups varied considerably.⁷ For example, responders from the control group were more likely to be over age 16, female, white or Asian, and less likely to come from a single-parent or non-English speaking household. This positive selection bias among the control group means that we are likely to underestimate the impact of the Boston SYEP on participants, because we would expect teens with these attributes to have better outcomes, even in the absence of the program. To minimize this selection bias, we make comparisons between treatments and controls within race/gender/age groupings.

Job readiness

Through SYEP, youth have the opportunity to explore potential careers, develop relationships with adult mentors, and practice work readiness skills, potentially leading to future employment opportunities. During the summer of 2015, Boston SYEP participants showed significant improvements along most of the dimensions of job readiness skills that were measured. Figure 2 demonstrates that there were large significant increases in the percent reporting they had a resume (+29 percentage points) and a cover letter (+20 percentage points) as well as modest improvements in the percent of participants that had searched online for jobs (+12 percentage points), and had practiced interviewing with an adult (+10 percentage points). Smaller but significant improvements were also observed in the percent of participants that had developed answers to typical interview questions (+ 9 percentage points), had reviewed at least one job application (+ 8 percentage points) and had assembled all the key information needed to apply to a job (+7 percentage points). Although nearly all demographic groups saw similar improvements, non-white and younger teens experienced the biggest gains.

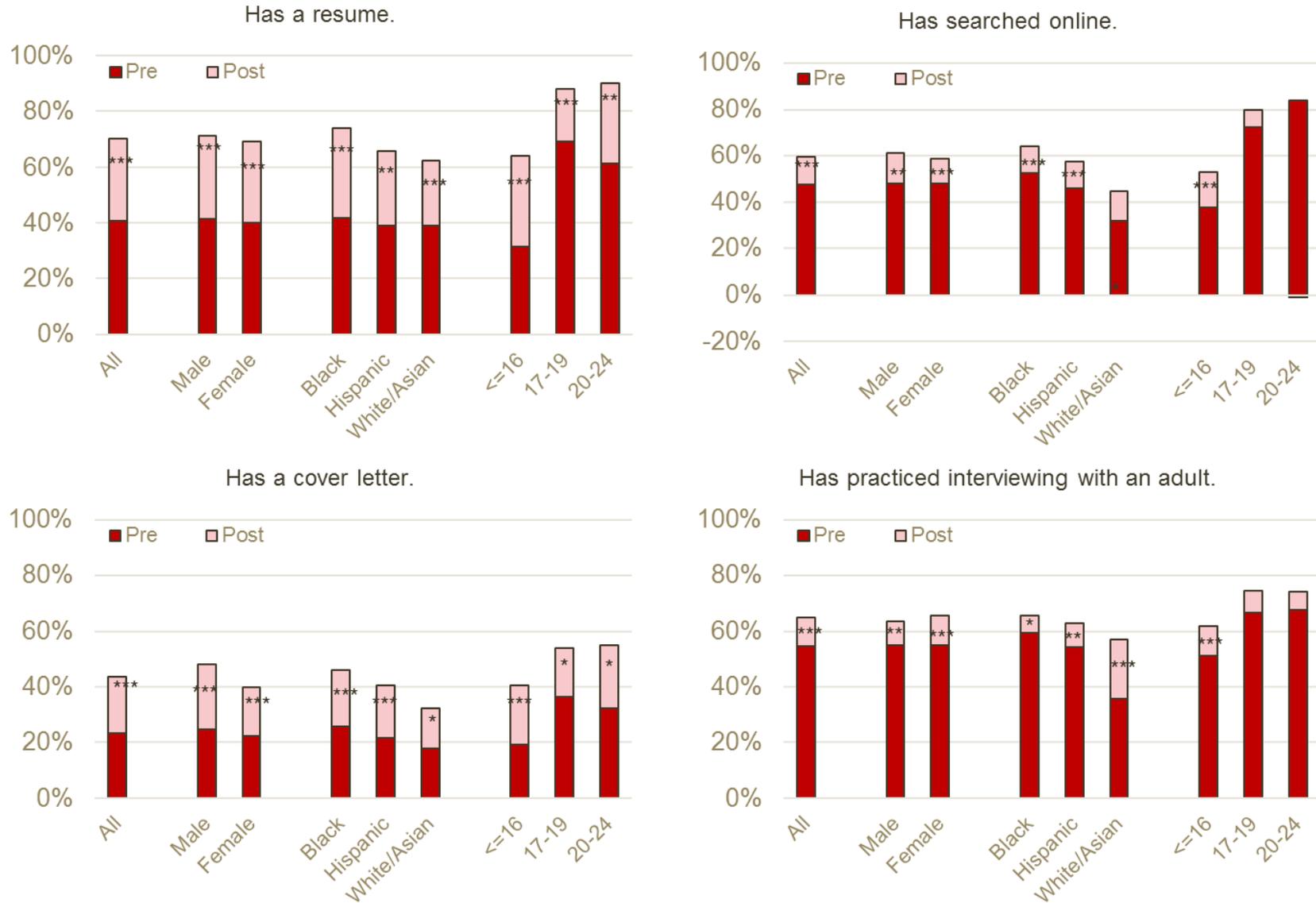
⁷ The pre- and post-surveys were administered to participants on-site under adult supervision, yielding a completion rate of roughly 66 percent (n=663) across both surveys. In contrast, the post-survey was administered to non-participants on-line, resulting in a similarly sized sample (n=761) but a much smaller percent response rate (21 percent).

Additionally, it appears that participants developed confidence in their job readiness skills after the completion of the Boston SYEP, compared to the start of the summer. Among the various skill sets we asked about, job readiness was the only one for which there was a small but significant **decrease** in the percent of teens indicating that they would like to develop or improve.⁸ This result was driven largely by the groups that saw the biggest improvements in job readiness measures—namely Hispanics and younger teens. Moreover, a large proportion of teens across all groups either agreed or strongly agreed that because of the SYEP they had learned work-related soft skills, such as how to be on time (87%), how to organize their work for the day (86%), how to solve problems (73%), and how to apply new computer skills (50%).

Despite showing improvement over the summer, teens in the treatment group outperformed those in the control group only in terms of preparing a resume (+15.1 percentage points) and cover letter (+18.9 percentage points). With the other job-readiness skills, both treatments and controls reported similar levels of competency, with more than three-quarters responding favorably for most questions. The only question for which the control group reported a more favorable outcome (+5.9 percentage points) was for having completed at least one online job application form, which could be explained by the need to search for a job independently, instead of through SYEP.

⁸ The other skills we asked about were academic skills (i.e. reading, writing, math), communication skills (i.e. public speaking, writing, and writing emails), organizational skills (i.e. time management, keeping a calendar), money management skills (i.e. paying bills, using savings account), computer skills (i.e. using Word or Excel, programming), and conflict resolution (i.e. finding nonviolent ways to solve disagreements with peers).

Figure 2
Changes in Job Readiness Skills for Boston SYEP Participants



Source: Data for pre- versus post-survey participants reflect the author's calculations based on survey data provided by the City of Boston, Office of Workforce Development.
 Note: *Indicates that the difference is statistically significance at the 10 percent level, ** at the 5 percent level, and *** at the 1 percent level.

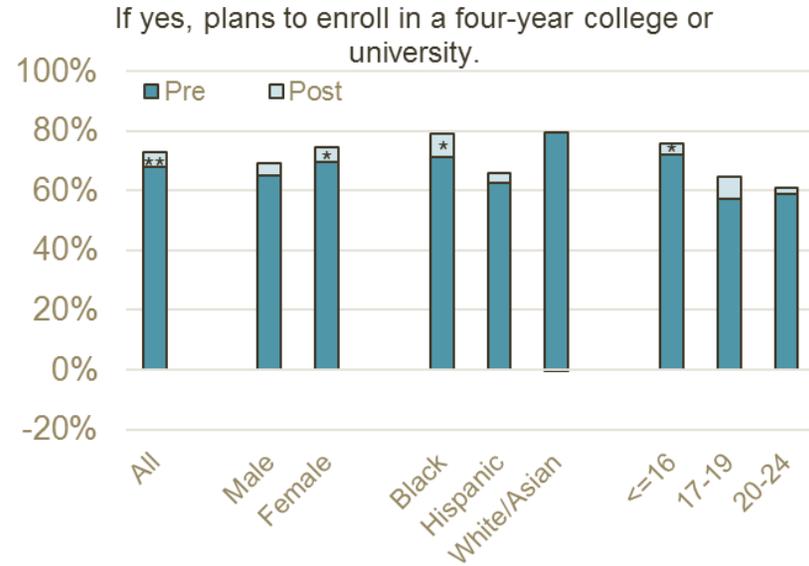
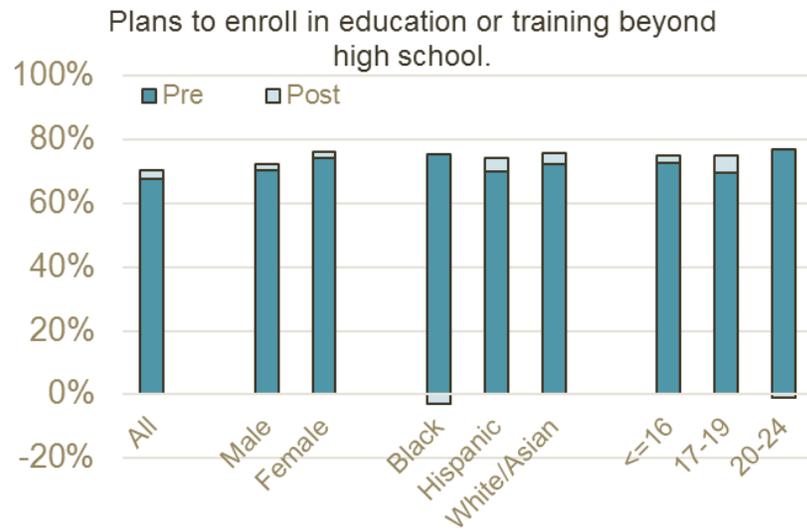
For the most part, these findings were consistent across all demographic groups, yet some additional benefits were found for minority males. For example, African American males in the program were more likely than their peers in the control group to have searched online for a job and to have developed answers to typical interview questions. Hispanic males were also more likely to have asked an adult to serve as a reference. This suggests that the Boston SYEP may differentially affect disadvantaged youth, reducing gaps in job readiness skills across groups.

Academic aspirations

Teens involved with SYEP gain experiences that shape their aspirations, potentially raising their academic achievement. Among Boston SYEP participants, little changed as to whether they planned to enroll in an education or training program after high school, but there was a shift in the type of program they expected to enroll in. Figure 3 shows that the percent of participants indicating that they planned to enroll in a four-year college or university increased by 4.9 percentage points and declined for all other categories, including attending a vocational or technical program, a training program, or a two-year college. This shift was most prevalent among females, African Americans, and younger teens.

These findings persisted when comparing the treatment and control groups. Program participants were less certain than the control group that they wanted to attend college (-7.4 percentage points). Yet recall that the control group exhibited attributes that likely predisposed them to better outcomes—such as being older, non-minority, and coming from two-parent households. That said, among those who planned to enroll in an education or training program after high school, teens in the treatment group were more likely to report wanting to go to a four-year college. The largest impact was found for African American males. This finding is consistent with research related to mentoring, where having a teacher who graduated from a selective college does not increase the likelihood of low-income students to attend college, but does increase the likelihood that a low-income student will apply to a selective college (Hoxby & Turner, 2013).

Figure 3
Changes in Academic Aspirations for Boston SYEP Participants



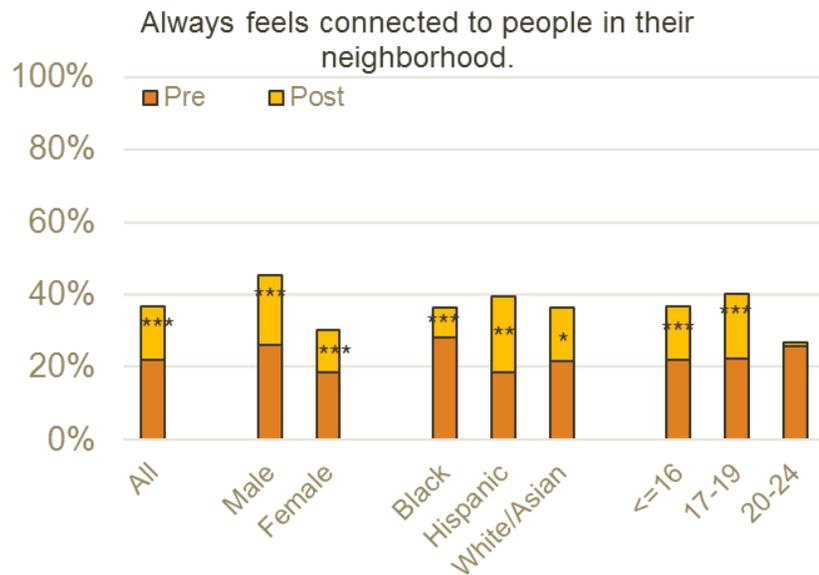
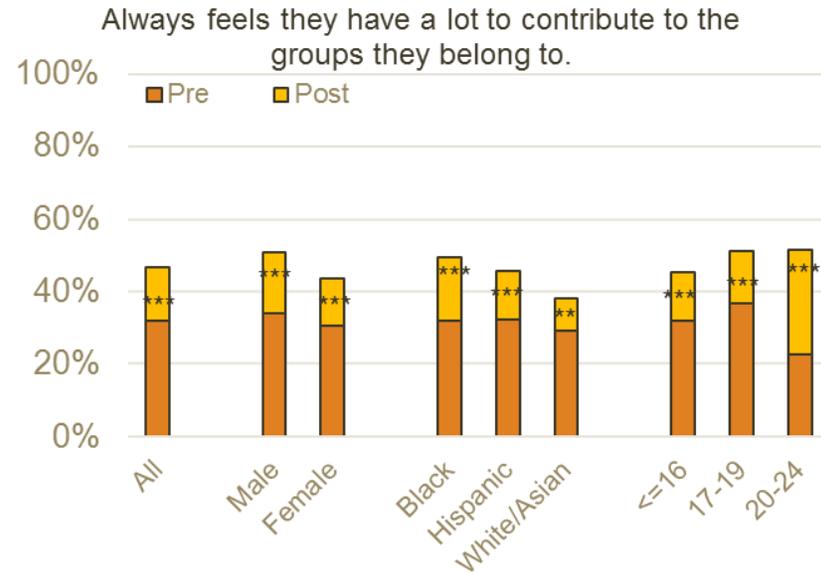
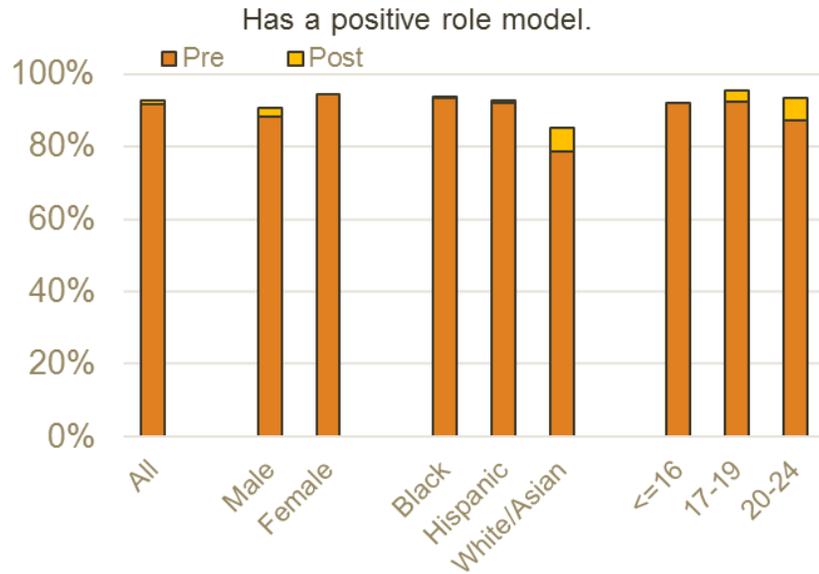
Source: Data for pre- versus post-survey participants reflect the author's calculations based on survey data provided by the City of Boston, Office of Workforce Development.
 Note: *Indicates that the difference is statistically significance at the 10 percent level, ** at the 5 percent level, and *** at the 1 percent level.

Social engagement

SYEP provides youth with a set of socially productive activities, possibly decreasing the risk of exposure to, or participation in, violence and delinquent behavior. Additionally, the SYEP places many teens in jobs with CBOs or other organizations within their communities, potentially increasing community engagement. During the summer of 2015, Boston SYEP participants' attitudes towards their communities improved dramatically. Figure 4 indicates that the percent of participants reporting that, over the past 30 days, they "always had a lot to contribute" to the groups to which they belonged jumped by 15 percentage points, showing large and significant gains across all demographic groups. Similar positive improvements occurred in the share of teens that said they "always felt connected to their neighborhood," with the largest gains observed among males, Hispanics, and younger teens. Additionally, over three-fourths of teens either agreed or strongly agreed that because of the SYEP, they had learned about managing their emotions and temper, asking for help when they needed it, and constructively resolving a conflict with a peer.

Compared to other outcomes, the impact of the Boston SYEP on participants' attitudes towards their community, relative to the control group, was the most prominent. Teens in the treatment group were far more likely to report that they felt they always had a lot to contribute to the groups that they belonged to (+14.9 percentage points), that they felt connected to the people in their neighborhood (+21.7 percentage points) and that they felt safe walking around the neighborhood (+19.7 percentage points). While the mechanisms behind these changes remain unexplained in full, it was striking how these findings were universal across youth of all races, genders, and ages.

Figure 4
Changes in Attitudes Towards Community for Boston SYEP Participants



Source: Data for pre- versus post-survey participants reflect the author's calculations based on survey data provided by the City of Boston, Office of Workforce Development.
 Note: *Indicates that the difference is statistically significance at the 10 percent level, ** at the 5 percent level, and *** at the 1 percent level.

Conclusion and policy implications

The survey responses of participants indicate that in the short term, the Boston SYEP positively impacted teens in many of the ways it was designed to do. Relative to the control group, participants in the program appeared to gain some additional job readiness skills, especially when it came to resumes, cover letters, and preparation for interviews. Among those indicating plans to pursue higher education, participants were more likely to raise their sights toward enrolling in a four-year college. Finally, all participants reported that they had greatly improved their attitudes towards their communities. Overall, these trends are encouraging, particularly because the largest gains were for minority youth.

These initial results have enhanced our understanding of the short-term successes of the Boston SYEP, but they also underscore the need to integrate administrative data on long-term outcomes to evaluate the program's impact over time. It is unclear whether the self-reported improvements in job readiness, academic aspirations, and social engagement will result in increased employment, greater academic achievement, or reductions in delinquent and criminal behavior down the road. And while the short-term benefits of the program are undeniably valuable, policymakers are increasingly seeking to use the SYEP as a vehicle to help disadvantaged youth long after their summer experiences.

Understanding which SYEP elements have the greatest impact and for whom can help direct limited city resources towards helping the greatest number of youth. Some proponents suggest that the program could target disadvantaged youth more effectively with added layers of instruction, mentoring, and support services. Others see the program's greatest value-added in exposing as many youth as possible to the work world, and in helping to place young people in environments where they can develop. Whether SYEP should be a light-touch / high-volume intervention or something deeper and more targeted can be determined only with better insights into how SYEP impact youth, and for whom those impacts are the greatest.

We should be mindful that summer jobs programs are not the only tools available to improve outcomes for at-risk youth. Vocational training, career technical education (CTE) programs, and dual enrollment between high school and community colleges have also shown promise (An, 2012; Castellano, Sundell, Overman, & Aliaga, 2012; Fraser, 2008; Holzer, 2015;

Kemple, 2008). However, SYEP have many advantages: they occur during the summer months when youth are likely to be idle, they target disadvantaged youth, and they cost less than other interventions. Again, in the absence of better data on program implementation and performance, it is hard to determine where policymakers should be investing their resources.

In the second phase of our evaluation, we hope to tackle these questions by linking the survey responses reported in this brief to administrative records on long-term employment, academic, and behavioral outcomes that track students for up to three years. By linking the two types of data, we can better articulate *how* SYEP affect teens and in turn produce better labor market, academic, and behavioral outcomes. In this way, we believe that future research can have important ramifications for similar programs, policies, and practices aimed at increasing economic opportunity for youth in other cities across the nation.

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