



Hire LA: Summer Youth Employment Program Evaluation Report 2014

Executive Summary



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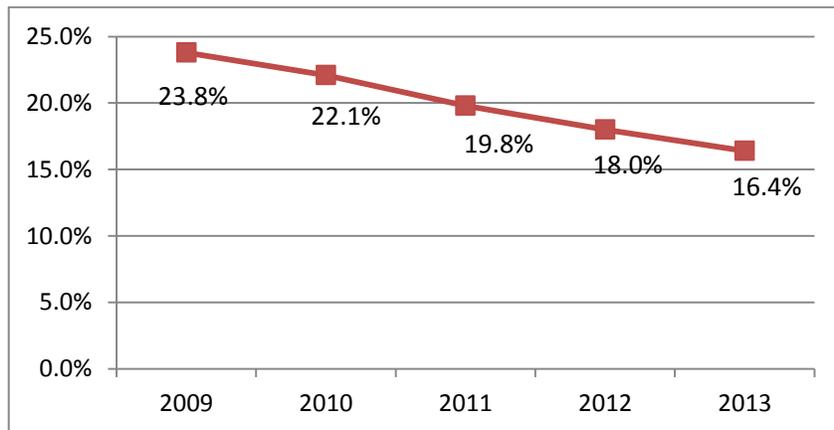
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Overview

Youth employment rates have declined dramatically nationwide, in California and Los Angeles County, in recent years. This is not a local phenomenon, but a national problem. In Los Angeles County the percent of 16-19 year olds employed fell from 23.8% in 2009 to 16.4 percent in 2013 (see Figure 1 below; American Community Survey, 2015). This decline fits with the national data, showing a similar decline in youth employment nationwide (Schwartz & Leos-Urbel, 2014).

Figure 1: Los Angeles County Employment Rate for 16-19 Year Olds 2009-13



The summer of 2014 brought a renewed focus to summer youth employment and the City set a goal of expanding the program to 10,000 participants. The program was called “HIRE LA’s Youth”. For purposes of this report we will refer to it as the Summer Youth Employment Program or SYEP. The goals of the program were to provide work experience and in addition:

- To increase youths’ career aspirations and career awareness,
- To increase youths’ motivation,
- To improve youths’ “work readiness” skills,
- To encourage youth to continue their education or find employment.

Evaluation Approach

As part of this initiative, the City committed to evaluating the impact of the Summer Youth Employment Program. To this end, the Economic and Workforce Development Department of

the City of Los Angeles contracted with our team of researchers at California State University, Northridge, to conduct an evaluation of the 2014 Summer Youth Employment Program.

Our evaluation of the program involved five data collection efforts. First, a sample of youth participants were surveyed at two time points: 1) as they entered the program and 2) at exit. Second, we administered a follow-up survey seven months after the program ended. Third, we conducted a series of focus groups with participants to gain a more in-depth understanding of their experiences. Finally, we surveyed the adults who supervised youth to get their evaluation of the program.

Key Findings

1. SYEP serves a diverse population of youth, who are on a positive track but who have weak labor market attachment.

SYEP participants were diverse in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and experience. Most learned about the program through personal connections or through referrals from schools or other agencies. Fourteen percent learned about the program through the HIRE LA website.

Overall the large majority of participants are on a positive path. Over 84% are in school. They report positive attitudes towards school, work and careers. However, participants have a weak labor market attachment, with only 24% of youth participants having worked in the last 6 months. They also report limited knowledge about jobs and report they have few connections for finding jobs or getting career information.

2. Youth are at different stages in their career development.

The SYEP program includes youth who have just entered high school and youth who have completed several years of college. We found that these two groups differed significantly in their career awareness and career development. Not surprisingly, college students have clearer career plans than high school students. Another group comparison shows that students with previous work experience report more career development than those who have not worked. Female participants also report more career development than male participants. This may reflect a larger trend for women to mature earlier than men and may not be related to program performance.

3. SYEP mostly provides employment experience through service jobs in schools and nonprofit organizations.

Over two-thirds of participants worked in schools or non-profits, while only 6.3% worked in private sector jobs. The most common types of jobs were: “office work,” “janitorial work” and “child care”. It is important to note that there are other components of SYEP, which we did not evaluate, that deal directly with placing youth in private sector jobs.

4. Youth show small but significant gains in career development from the beginning to the end of the program.

Most summer youth employment program evaluations find small positive gains for youth. We found similar results. Youth showed small but statistically significant gains in their: “comfort with making a career decision,” “clarity about their career interests,” “knowledge about careers,” and “importance of making a career choice”. In our follow-up survey, a majority of the youth reported they believed their experience in the program would help them find a job and advance in their career. A majority also agreed that the experience encouraged them to continue their education, and most did. Finally, the program provided many participants, who had not previously worked, with work experience, which enables them to include work experience and a reference on future job applications or resumes.

5. Overall youth were highly satisfied with their SYEP experience.

Youth reported high levels of satisfaction with their SYEP experience, overall average satisfaction was 4.3 on a five-point scale. Youth were slightly less satisfied, average 4.1, with the quality of work readiness and financial literacy training. In focus groups, youth reported a wide range of benefits from the program, including earning needed money, gaining work experience that will lead to more employment, getting mentoring from supervisors, and learning patience. In follow-up surveys administered seven months after the SYEP experience, over 96% reported they would recommend the program to someone like them.

6. Most youth followed-up on their plans to return to school and/or seek employment.

At exit, 91% of participants said they planned to enroll in school and 91% said they planned to work. Seven months after leaving the program, 85% of participants surveyed were in school, and half of those not enrolled were working, leaving only 7% of all participants not in school or work. Over 80% of those in school attend full-time. Thirty-five percent of all participants were working seven months after leaving the program, compared to only 24% working before they entered the program. Most worked part-time and earned between \$9 and \$10 dollars per hour. Virtually all the out-of-school and out-of-work youth report they are looking for work.

7. Adults who supervised youth participants report high levels of satisfaction with the program.

The supervisors of the youth participants report high levels of satisfaction with their experience. Overall satisfaction averaged 8.8 on a ten-point scale. Perhaps more importantly, almost 94% of the supervisors said they would participate in the program again. Supervisors did have a number of suggestions for improving the program, including: adding more hours of work, improving the match between youth and the job, and improving youths’ work readiness.

Recommendations

Based on our evaluation of this program and our review of other evaluations of summer youth employment programs conducted in other cities, we have four recommendations for improving the program. Three deal with changes that can be made in the coming year, and one deals with longer term changes to the program.

This year

1. Improve financial literacy and work readiness training.

Youth develop quickly. A 16-year-old about to enter her junior year in high school is at a very different stage of development from a 20-year-old her about to enter her junior year of college. Because of these differences, we recommend that both financial literacy training and work readiness training be delivered at two different levels. The first level would be designed for high school aged students, 14 to 18, many of whom will be working for the first time and are still in high school or have just completed high school. The level of both financial literacy and work readiness training will be more focused on basics and be appropriate for high school students with little or no work experience. The second level course would be designed for youth 19 yearsold and older and cover more advanced content that is aligned with their developmental stage and addresses their specific needs (e.g., developing career goals).

While participant satisfaction with the training component of the program was high, we believe it could be improved. We believe if trainers focused on making the training more interactive, by using active learning techniques, such as exercises, role plays, case discussion and break out groups, it would be more effective, especially for the younger participants. One way to facilitate this more engaging training would be to select some of the college students in the program and use them as teaching assistants to help facilitate the active learning activities.

2. Improve the quality and variety of placements.

As we noted in the supervisor survey, 70% of supervisors have participated in the program before. Agencies build relationships with local non-profit and government agencies and a few private employers and tend to return to these agencies each year. This is efficient and helps get the program started quickly each summer. But many of these placements do not introduce youth to higher-level occupations or emerging sectors of the economy. Also, we recognize the program has a goal of adding more private sector placements in emerging industries, such as entertainment, transportation, health care and technology.

To accomplish this we recommend that agencies, with the help of EWDD, identify private sector employers in their area prior to the summer and establish relationships that can lead to summer jobs, where youth will have more contact with a variety of professions. These placements will be particularly appropriate for the older youth who have some work experience and post-secondary education.

In our experience, employers, particularly private employers, who are willing to provide higher-level work experience want to select their own youth. This came up in the suggestions from supervisors about improving the program. We recommend that agencies establish job fairs where youth who are interested and prepared for higher-level placements get to meet and talk with employers.

3. Build Structured Reflection Into the Program

The educational philosopher John Dewey said: “We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience.” We found, when we conducted focus groups with youth participants, that they were eager to talk about their experiences and in the process gained insights into themselves and the nature of work. Effective work experience programs should include an opportunity for participants to reflect on what they have learned, how they have developed, and how they can apply this in the future. We recommend that some structured reflection be built into the program.

We see a couple ways this can be done. First, after the initial 25 hours of work experience, youth could return to the agency where in groups they could discuss their initial experience in their placement. In the groups youth could compare experiences with the discipline of work, dealing with supervisors and other issues. Together they could do some problem solving and get coaching from each other and an adult. Again college students interested in human services could facilitate these groups.

At the conclusion of the 100 hours of work experience, groups could meet again to reflect on the experience and to do some career planning activities. Specifically, youth could set short-term and mid-term goals for education and employment. We know that setting concrete goals is motivating and increases the chance that youth will follow through.

In practical terms, it would also be a good time to help youth who plan to go on for post-secondary education or to seek a permanent job to find the resources they need to take these steps.

Long Term

4. Start the program earlier in the year.

City staff and the agencies do heroic work to get the summer youth employment program launched and get thousands of youth placed each summer. This rush to roll out the program each year is driven by last minute funding decisions, the fact that money for the new fiscal year cannot be spent until July 1, and other administrative constraints. With public school starting in late August, this leaves a very short window for delivering the program, and students are out of school for over a month before the program begins.

In New York City, intake is done during spring break in the public schools and placements are made in advance so that youth can begin work promptly when school ends. Such a system would be ideal in Los Angeles as well. Accomplishing this will mean overcoming many administrative barriers but we recommend it as a longer term goal for improving the program.