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Summer Youth Employment Programs 2020: Lessons from the Field

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CLASP
The Center for Law and Social Policy

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This is part one of a three-part series written by CLASP and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) offer short-term, paid opportunities for youth and young adults to gain career exposure, training, and work experience. These programs have been **shown** to improve participants' economic, academic, and behavioral outcomes. Drawing on our survey of 73 SYEP providers and local public funders, this series is designed to provide policymakers, local systems leaders, and practitioners with insight into how SYEPs responded in 2020 to the economic and health challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part 1: Why Summer Jobs?

Do you remember your first summer job experience? How old were you? What did you learn? Did you have a part-time job or internship in your teens? What kinds of work experiences did you have in your 20s?

We remember ours:

“My first job was at Grillworks, making cheesesteaks and hoagies in downtown Philadelphia. I learned how to multi-task, interact with customers from all over the world, count money fast without the register, and make a mean sandwich! The following summer, I participated in an internship through a partnership between my school district and the University of Pennsylvania. There, I was exposed to so many careers. I learned research skills, what it means to ‘take lunch,’ and that I belonged in that space just as much as anyone else.” – Kisha Bird

“My first job was selling bicycles at a shop in Virginia. The customer service mindset I was first exposed to there still informs how I solve problems and build relationships. I developed confidence and communication skills that prepared me for future opportunities.” – Mike Swigert

“My first official job was making breakfast sandwiches at Hardee’s. If I was late, my boss was unhappy, and my coworkers were left scrambling to cover my station. I learned that ‘on time’ means 5 minutes early and timeliness is a necessary part of working on a team. Even more importantly, the income from that job helped make my college dreams possible.” – Noel Tieszen

The teens and early 20s are critical developmental years, when young people need experiences that include learning and skill-building, positive identity development, and increasing independence, all with the support of caring adults, peers, and community. For many youth, a summer job is their first experience in the workforce. **Research** shows that early work experiences such as summer jobs can help all young people develop communication, higher-order thinking, and social skills, as well as self-control and positive self-concept. For young people living in communities with low incomes, summer jobs can also serve as an equity strategy by providing access to experiences such as civic and community engagement, private sector internships, and career exploration. **Many youth** use summer job earnings to purchase school supplies, help their families buy food, or contribute to college costs. SYEPs aren’t a panacea, but they can be an important way to explore career options and interests on the way to adulthood.

Summer Youth Employment 2020 and COVID-19

In March 2020, our nation began waves of indefinite shutdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. By spring, the country faced even greater uncertainty. Schools’ plans for closures and reopening shifted frequently, and job security concerns grew as businesses closed or severely cut

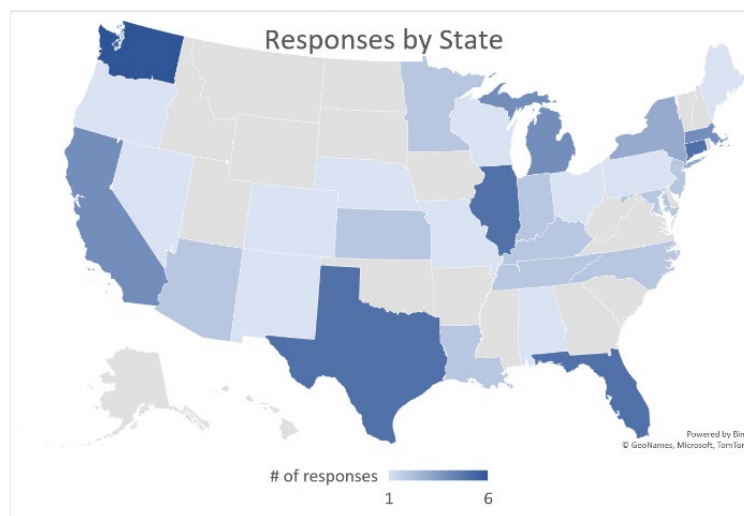
hours. All the while, frontline and essential workers continued to make sure the economy didn't come to a complete stop in the middle of a public health crisis. SYEPs typically begin hiring staff and recruiting and enrolling youth in late winter and early spring. In 2020, with state and local governments strapped for cash to ride out a set of largely unpredictable crises, plans to continue SYEPs remained in limbo.

Despite these uncertainties – not to mention significant technological, logistical, and funding challenges – many communities adapted their SYEPs to provide paid work experience to thousands of young people during the height of the first COVID-19 wave in this country. Respondents to our survey served approximately 53,325 young people. While this was down from their projections of 83,000, it was not significantly lower than the number they enrolled the previous year. The 60 survey respondents who went forward with SYEPs in 2020 served 79 percent of their total number served in 2019.

Survey Background and Methodology

In an effort to understand and document summer youth employment experiences during COVID-19, the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions and the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) developed a survey for SYEP providers and local funders. We distributed it through the Communities Collaborating to Reconnect Youth Network, Opportunity Youth Forum, National League of Cities, National Youth Employment Coalition, and U.S. Conference of Mayors.

Who completed the survey? 73 organizations across 60 communities in 30 states completed the survey in October 2020. Of those 73 organizations, 10 were SYEP funders only, 27 were funders AND program providers, and 36 were program providers only.

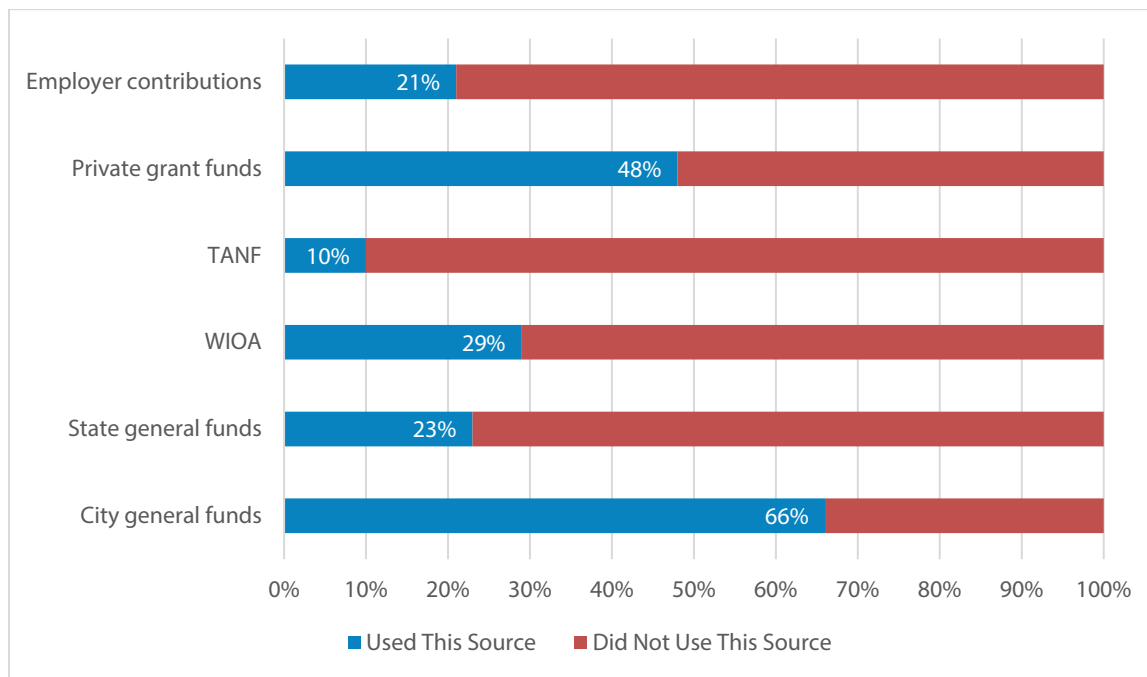


Funding SYEP

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 eliminated federal funding for summer jobs in favor of more year-round, comprehensive youth development and workforce programs. It was not until the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 in response to the Great Recession that the federal government made a significant investment in summer jobs. States and local areas used ARRA funds to enroll over 355,000 youth in SYEPs. Of these participants, 36 percent were out-of-school youth. According to a **survey** conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, 74 percent of SYEP participants reported that they would not have had a summer job without the program. However, federal support for SYEPs dwindled after ARRA funding was depleted. Consistent with previous studies, survey respondents reported that most 2020 SYEPs were supported by local funds.

SYEP Funding Sources

All Respondents (n = 73)



Policy and program considerations

Young people today are coming of age amid a once-in-a-lifetime crisis. Alongside year-round programs, postsecondary bridging, and other subsidized training and work experiences, SYEPs can contribute significantly to lifelong economic mobility for today's youth and an equitable national recovery. The federal government can help by providing the following targeted supports to states and local areas.

- **Immediate COVID Response:** As young people and communities recover from the COVID-19 crisis, Congress must consider the effects of higher unemployment and lower SYEP enrollment in 2020. States and local communities are working to sustain employer and industry relationships, but they will need funding to provide jobs this summer and robust work experiences this year and beyond.
- **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA):** Congress must reinstate a separate federal funding stream for summer youth employment when WIOA is reauthorized. Since WIOA was passed in 2014, SYEPs have made important advances in targeting resources for Opportunity Youth, increasing work-based learning, and developing high-quality work experiences. Including SYEPs in reauthorization will help communities better integrate summer jobs into these successful WIOA programs.
- **Equity and alignment with broader workforce and economic development goals:** SYEPs can be part of broader equity strategies by targeting specific youth populations (including youth of color and Opportunity Youth) that face barriers to employment, setting benchmarks for quality services and types of work experiences, and designing programs with equity goals in mind. Congress can invest in federal agencies to work with local and state governments in better aligning workforce and economic development systems through planning support and technical assistance.