

SYEP IN 2021: LESSONS FOR A CHANGING WORLD

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Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) represent the largest investment that many U.S. cities make in youth workforce development. When COVID-19 began its first sweep across the country in early 2020, [SYEPs scrambled](#) to meet unexpected [challenges](#) with remarkable [innovation](#).

With that experience of sudden change behind them, what lessons did SYEPs bring into 2021? What new challenges did they face? What should funders, policymakers, and providers consider as we approach another uncertain summer in 2022?

While we await more comprehensive research, this document summarizes key themes that emerged from interviews with SYEP funders, program providers, and youth participants in Albany, Denver, Louisville, Los Angeles, New York, and Orlando.

Challenges and Innovations in Program Design

Equity and Access: Most cities attempt to prioritize serving the youth they determine to be most in need of employment services. Some customize program models to meet the unique needs of youth impacted by the criminal legal system or concentrate funding in target ZIP codes. Others focus on building partnerships with community-based organizations to help with outreach. However, many cities' information systems aren't designed to disaggregate neighborhood-level data, either by demographic identifiers like race and home language or by circumstances such as experience in foster care. In 2021, SYEPs struggled to reach the large numbers of youth who had lost their connections to schools and other youth-serving agencies during the pandemic. Leaders expressed that data-sharing agreements with schools and other agencies, paired with investments in more powerful information systems, would help them identify the youth who could benefit most from SYEPs and monitor progress toward equity goals.

Placements: In some cities, SYEPs assigned youth to providers in their neighborhoods. New online platforms in other communities allowed youth to browse and apply directly to open positions, giving them more control over their summer experience.

Registration: Some SYEPs introduced online platforms to streamline enrollment. The ability to apply and submit documentation electronically reduced barriers for some youth but created new obstacles for youth without easy digital access or strong computer skills. Cities also struggled to serve undocumented youth, who are ineligible for services under some funding streams and frequently reluctant to participate due to fears of deportation.

Program Spotlight: Building on Relationships with Trusted Adults

The workforce system in Denver leveraged youth's existing relationships by training teachers to help their students build resumés and connect with internship opportunities.

Program Formats: Some host employers returned to SYEPs as economies reopened, but job opportunities in many sectors remained limited. Most SYEPs continued virtual programming. A few held periodic group activities (often outdoors) or offered a small number of in-person worksite options. Philadelphia Youth Network’s [recent report](#) details the importance, challenges, and financial implications of virtual and hybrid SYEP models.

Program Size: In most cities, participation plummeted in 2020, with moderate increases in 2021. (Among communities contacted, only Orlando saw growth in 2020 and 2021.) Funders and providers indicated a need for hard data to understand the reasons for decreased enrollment, but interviewees agreed that youth still want and need meaningful paid summer work experiences.

Shifting Priorities, Demands for Change

Funders, providers, and youth agreed that the pandemic has exacerbated almost every challenge young people face and contributed to significant shifts in their priorities. Youth report that current summer job options often don’t meet their immediate needs or prepare them for careers. They demand more.

Six priorities surfaced repeatedly during interviews. Cities need to consider these concerns as they continue to improve SYEPs.

Racial Justice: Continual high-profile incidents of police violence and community protests remain top-of-mind for many youth. Christopher Locke of KentuckianaWorks shared that as Louisville was rocked by the police murders of Breonna Taylor and David McAtee, “immediately going to a work assignment was not the first thing on [youth’s] minds.” Several SYEPs incorporated workshops and group discussions about racial equity topics into pre-employment training. Some also offered counseling for youth grappling with the emotional effects of oppression and violence against their communities.

Program Spotlight: Keeping Youth Connected to School

In Louisville, schools hired youth who had struggled with online learning to serve as junior counselors in children’s summer learning programs.

Program Spotlight: Investing in Youth Mental Health

The City of Albany incorporated mental health check-ins, breathing exercises, and other self-care activities into training to help youth learn to manage stress.

Health and Safety: In some cities, public-facing job opportunities went unfilled as youth weighed risks to their health and that of their families. The pandemic also heightened stress and trauma for many youth. SYEPs can help address these challenges by providing access to mental health supports and ensuring worksites follow effective health and safety protocols.

Job Quality: Young people who witnessed parents’ employment challenges during the pandemic are demanding better for themselves, seeking jobs with fair wages, flexible scheduling, sick leave, and remote work options. Workplace climate is also a factor. Youth reported facing racism and sexual harassment on the job and feeling afraid to speak up. They suggested training staff to recognize and address problems at worksites and find other placements as needed.

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“Kids are different nowadays. Love to see it.”

– Naomi Porter, youth organizer and former SYEP
participant



Family Responsibilities: Due to continued rolling closures and COVID outbreaks in schools and child care facilities, young people are increasingly responsible for caring for and even educating younger siblings and their own children. Some also became caregivers for sick family members. Like other employers, SYEPs need to accommodate young people's family responsibilities.

Immediate Income: Earning money remains important to youth, especially for those whose families lost income during the pandemic. Some rely on summer jobs to contribute to household bills or cover personal expenses like clothing and school supplies. Yet accommodating a short-term job – paying for transportation and work-appropriate clothing, juggling other responsibilities, navigating paperwork and other logistics – is not always worth the time and effort. Low pay and insufficient work hours discourage participation.

Program Spotlight: Focusing on Career Development

Orlando youth choose from 3 SYEP models: *Explore* brings youth into college classrooms, *Experience* places them in paid internships, and *Accelerate* offers specialized training and certifications in high-demand industries.

Program Spotlight: Supporting Youth and Families at Home

In Los Angeles, certified teachers trained and supervised cohorts of youth who were caring for children at home. Participants gained skills in tutoring and technology while helping younger children with homework and online activities.

Education and Career Advancement: Many youth see traditional summer jobs in retail or food service as dead ends that are not worth their time. They want summer jobs that are relevant to their career interests and help them earn meaningful credentials, gain technical skills, and access postsecondary education.

SYEPs can play an important role in advancing racial and economic justice in a nation where systems of power perpetuate inequitable access to economic opportunity. As communities continue to adjust to changing social, economic, and public health circumstances, young people's priorities will also continue to evolve. Understanding what matters to youth will be crucial to developing high-quality paid summer work experiences that meet their immediate needs and prepare them to reach their future goals.