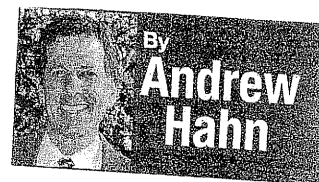


They Are Back! Summer Jobs Return for Poor Kids, and a Confession



The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 contains good news about summer programs for disadvantaged young people preparing for jobs, higher education and life. As this is written, billions of dollars may be available in workforce development programs and funds for as many as 1 million jobs for teens. This news reminded me of a Today Show appearance that I made in the early 1980s and led me to reflect about what these themes from the past suggest for today.

Quick story: When I went on the Today Show with host Bryant Gumbel way back in 1983, I prepared for the following kind of question: "Tell me, Professor Hahn, aren't summer jobs programs just 'fire insurance' aimed more at keeping kids off the streets than at learning on the job?" When he asked the question, I, of course, made a feigned attempt to look shocked, trying my hardest to make Bryant a tad uncomfortable for a question that suggested that this was really all about summer rioting – as in the Watts riots of 1965 – and what kinds of urban unrest "those kids" (you know, "those minority kids") might initiate.

But, truth be told, I welcomed his question. It gave me an opportunity to say that summer jobs programs do far more than prevent urban violence. They provide first-ever work experiences, money for the family, new skills and competencies, a foundation for further investments in human capital, and maybe even academic enrichment connected to the worksite.

So, a public confession: I welcomed the subtly racist question, because I could use it opportunistically to set the record straight.

Lesson for today: Don't do what I did back then. When you recruit summer worksites for teens in your community, don't allow anyone even to hint that civil unrest is one reason behind the need for work for teens. It sets the field back. It motivates social policy by fear, not by need, hope, or social justice. It is unnecessary.

Yes, it is true that summer programs can reduce criminal and high-risk behavior for youth, and surely, police departments worry about idleness when school is out. However, a better selling point is that the unem-

ployment rate for teens, and especially minority teens, is simply deplorable.

The unemployment rate for teens in recent summers has reached 17 percent – and that number was recorded before the current economic meltdown. For urban minority youth ages 16 to 19, the rate is double that for all teens and is rising because of competition from others in the same labor markets. These teens and millions of newly unemployed adult Americans are in the same sad economic boat. Getting them out of the boat and onto safe ground is what summer employment programs should be about.

A compelling selling point about summer youth programs is that teens can provide needed services in hospitals, day care centers, senior centers, parks and other public and private organizations.

Another confession: We adults were caught snoozing when the U.S. General Accounting Office reported from its investigations in the 1980s that some worksites were of poor quality. One television story found young people resting under a tree smoking a joint during the work assignment. This contributed to the "make-work" charge that the Labor Department then worked hard, and mostly successfully, to contain through excellent oversight, technical assistance and monitoring. Gearing up this year for a million jobs will be no easy task – and doubtless there will be some abuses – but now we have experience. The workforce development field has matured, and many techniques exist to address any make-work challenge. Consider, too, that expanded meaningful work options may be available in this era of renewed attention to infrastructure, green jobs and sound shovel-ready projects.

Back in the early days of the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and then the Summer Youth Employment Training Program (SYETP), we debated as a field whether academic connections should be wired into the programs.

Some workforce policy people sought to connect summer jobs in

We need to mount strong summer programs that fulfill a need for youths and their communities.

a meaningful way to summer and school year education and training. A large-scale initiative here at Brandeis University, called Summer Beginnings, sought creative ideas from communities to do just that.

Still, summer jobs ultimately were eliminated from the federal portfolio of safety net programs. Urban mayors never got over the loss of federal funding for summer jobs programs, and many of them are probably already thinking about how to sustain these new programs over the long term.

At my end, I am happy to see the federal summer jobs program return, even if it is just a one-summer thing, although I hope it is not. Maybe the youths served this summer will do so well and the country will take such pride in their accomplishments that a groundswell of support and love will move this program to the center of our national youth portfolio.

Meanwhile, to ensure success for this summer, we need to mount strong summer programs that are not wasteful, that fulfill a need for youths and their communities and that connect with academic content, not to mention real-life experiences. Such programs would evoke a kind of patriotic pride, and just possibly be the foundation for future years of federal summer jobs programs.

Andrew Hahn is professor and director of the Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy at Brandeis University's Heller School. ahahn@brandeis.edu