Summer Jobs for youth can curb violence.
Chicago business leaders, start hiring.

By Charles L. Evans

As our economy’s re-opening takes hold this summer, we can’t focus just on getting back to normal. Instead, we need to use the easing of the Covid-19 pandemic to seed economic opportunities that grow upward mobility across our city.

In my view, one of the first places to start is summer jobs for youth. Such employment can help limit the pandemic’s long-lasting consequences for 14 to 24 year-olds and their communities. And summer jobs programs have benefits that far exceed their costs.

Unfortunately, there is a summer jobs gap in Chicago. According to Sybil Madison, Chicago’s deputy mayor for education and human services, [10,000 to 15,000] more youth apply for jobs than are available each year through One Summer Chicago. This city program creates more than 20,000 summer employment opportunities and internships.

At the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, we’re working to close this gap by partnering with community organizations and schools — and we’re calling on businesses and residents to join us in this effort for our city’s future.

Since the start of the pandemic, far too many young Chicagoans have experienced the trauma that comes from social disconnection and isolation. This has only been compounded by disruptions in schooling, food insecurity, parental job loss, and lack of stable housing, with larger impacts in our South and West side neighborhoods.

Left unaddressed, I believe the toll of the pandemic could leave long-lasting scars on youth development and make it even more difficult for Chicago’s young people to achieve their potential.

Research shows that summer jobs are a powerful tool to mitigate challenges facing youth. Across many cities, summer jobs programs substantially reduce exposure to the criminal justice system. Studies find that, among participants, arrests for violent crime are up to 40 percent lower than if they didn’t participate. Avoiding these bad outcomes is critical for youth to graduate from high school, go on to college, or build skills toward a career. And based on surveys, a majority of summer jobs participants reinvests their earnings in the local community, either by financially supporting their families or by spending at local businesses.

Closing the summer jobs gap would allow thousands more youth and their communities to benefit from the financial support and reduction in violent crime that summer jobs programs deliver. It would also help them develop strong relationships with mentors who can support them as they navigate school or career choices. And they may gain opportunities to build socio-emotional and other “soft” skills that can help prepare youth for professional or personal success later in life. For children from families with limited resources, these are critical chances to overcome other barriers to economic opportunity.
Fortunately, we have a chance this summer to help close the summer jobs gap and strengthen the value of those experiences.

Our community development staff have been sharing their expertise and shining a light on summer jobs programs that can make a more direct impact. We have met with youth development experts across the city and convened summer jobs leaders. Those leaders have developed creative solutions to operationalize virtual summer jobs and internships.

Businesses and residents of Chicago can join these efforts. You can hire youth for the summer, volunteer, or serve as a mentor. Visit chicagofed.org/summerjobs to learn more on the benefits of summer jobs and get involved such as through Thrive Chicago, a local human services organization with an existing network of employers and non-profits to support Chicago’s youth.

Closing the summer jobs gap will also require people and businesses across the city to do more than simply create jobs. Youth face logistical challenges like ID requirements, transportation to get to work, or technology to work virtually. And to get the most from summer jobs, youth need to connect with longer-term apprenticeships, durable mentor relationships, or full-time jobs when the time comes. Our staff is researching solutions to these challenges and we are committed to working with our community partners to identify ways forward.

With your help, I believe an expansion of summer jobs can serve as a first step in not just returning to normal, but moving forward toward a stronger and more equitable future.

*Charles L. Evans is president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. The views expressed here are his and not necessarily those of the Federal Reserve System or Federal Open Market Committee.*