

NDTAC Issue Brief: Mentoring Youth Who Are Delinquent or High Risk

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The Issue

The impact of delinquency on various facets of the lives of young people has been well-documented. Often youth who are delinquent or at high risk of delinquency experience problems at school, at home, and in their communities. According to researchers Tanner, Davies, and O'Grady, delinquent youth have lower educational aspirations and are more likely to drop out of school than their nondelinquent peers [1]. Furthermore, once they enter the labor market, formerly delinquent youth tend to get less prestigious jobs and are more likely to

"Youth development experts now agree that mentoring is a critical element in any child's social, emotional and cognitive development. It builds a sense of industry and competency, boosts academic performance and broadens horizons. Without doubt, young people who have the benefit of caring adult mentors navigate the path to adulthood more successfully."

—MENTOR [8, p. 1].

be fired [2–4]. Finally, if these youth get married, they are more likely to divorce [5,6].¹ Thus, effective interventions for youth who are delinquent or high risk are in high demand as the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, as well as other child-serving

agencies and institutions, seek to improve outcomes. While it is acknowledged that preventing youth from engaging in "risky behaviors" is the ideal, "intervening when young people are already in trouble will be necessary as long as delinquency exists" [7, p. 2].

Research supports the use of mentoring programs for at-risk youth.

For example, a large evaluation in the mid-90s of the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America's (BBBSA) community-based mentoring program found that "mentoring programs can positively affect young people" [9, p. ii]. Youth with multiple risk factors for delinquency and criminal involvement may lack the positive support and guidance in their homes, schools, or communities. Therefore, mentoring programs have been developed to provide these youth a supportive and caring relationship with adult mentors. The success of some mentoring programs like BBBSA has led to a policy interest in mentoring as "a form of social intervention in such diverse areas as welfare reform, education, violence prevention, school-to-work transition and national service" [9, p. 2].

The content of this Issue Brief does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Government. The programs/models featured in this Brief have not been evaluated by the Center. This Brief is meant to serve as a tool and to provide examples of work being done in the field. This Brief was created by American Institutes for Research (AIR) through funding from the U.S. Department of Education, contract no. ED-04-CO-0025/0006.

Does this work apply to youth who are at high risk or already delinquent? Yes.

Although a few studies, largely focused on recidivism, found “few programs able to make a significant difference” [7, p. 15], other evaluations of programs specifically targeting these youth populations have found that “the relationship with a reliable, caring adult who nurtures the child’s positive growth and development is seen as a key support for helping to break the chain of criminal activity that too often descends from one generation to the next” [10, p. 36]. By intervening during the developmental stages of adolescence and early adulthood, mentors have shown success in helping to alter negative behaviors that may contribute to later delinquent and criminal involvement. For example, a 2006 evaluation of mentoring programs for youth who were delinquent or at high risk for delinquency found that mentored youth were less likely to respond to social conflicts with fighting, were 43–75 percent less likely to report substance abuse, and were indirectly 58 percent less likely to be rearrested [7].² While mentoring may not be a panacea for working with high-risk youth, it seems that it “may provide an essential component—dependable human involvement and caring—that has proven difficult to harness in the institutions and environments that characterize these youths’ lives” [7, p. 27].

Current Situation

Though the numbers have been dropping slightly over the past few years [11], law enforcement agencies continue to detain more than 2 million juveniles each year. Of those youth, nearly 75 percent are referred to juvenile court and eventually return to their communities [12]. These numbers do not

account for the number of youth who are at high risk for delinquency, including those youth who have a parent who is incarcerated. According to a U.S. Senate Report, children of prisoners are six times more likely than other children to be incarcerated at some point in their lives [10]. Because of these and other startling statistics, researchers and advocates assert that, “without effective intervention strategies, as many as 70 percent of these [high-risk] children will become involved with the criminal justice system” [10, p. 2]. Indeed, interventions are necessary to “support and redirect those [youth] who come into contact with the juvenile justice system” [12, p. 1] to ensure that the environments to which they return are safe and to help the youth themselves succeed.

As of 2005:

- **Three million adults have formal, one-to-one mentoring relationships with young people; an increase of 19 percent from 2002.**
- **Ninety-six percent of existing mentors would recommend mentoring to others.**
- **While the average mentoring relationship lasts 9 months, 38 percent last at least 1 year.**
- **The majority of mentors are willing to work with youth in unique or difficult situations, including children of incarcerated parents, youth with disabilities, and immigrant youth.**

—MENTOR [8]

Mentoring is one way researchers and advocates have argued to provide the necessary levels of support and direction for youth who are delinquent or high risk. Though acknowledging that most programs do not target this youth population, *Mentoring in America 2005* highlights the fact that “the mentoring community has made significant progress in increasing the number of young people who benefit from a mentoring

relationship” [8, p. ii]. Their latest poll on mentoring found that “as many as 3 million adults have formal, one-to-one mentoring relationships with young people.” Yet, while the number of mentors continues to increase, MENTOR’s findings also indicate that “there is still a great deal of work to be done” in terms of meeting the needs of America’s youth [8, p. i].

Perhaps the biggest struggle faced by most mentoring programs looking to work with youth who are delinquent or high risk is finding willing adult volunteering to spend time with a unique and sometimes difficult population. Further, older youth with challenging behavior and often undiagnosed learning disabilities are difficult to engage. Mentors for such youth must be prepared with creative engagement strategies, as well as the commitment to be around for at least 1 year. MENTOR’s 2005 poll shows that less than 20 percent of all mentors surveyed have worked with youth with an incarcerated parent, a youth in the foster care system, or a youth in the juvenile justice system [8, p. 5]. Despite mentors’ lack of experience in relationships with this unique population, the same poll did find a general willingness on the part of volunteers to mentor these youth, ranging from 67 to 81 percent (based on the youth’s circumstances). This is a positive sign for mentoring programs seeking willing volunteers to work with youth who are delinquent or high risk.

Recruiting mentors to work with youth whose circumstances may make forming positive relationships more difficult is not the only challenge faced by mentoring programs. These programs also encounter the challenges faced by other community-based mentoring programs that target at-risk youth—misaligned expectations, lack of rapport, poor matching,

lack of staff support, resistant youth, problems with parents and/or families members, and more [8, p. 9]. In addition, mentor programs for high-risk and delinquent youth must also overcome the obstacle of positively affecting sometimes hard-to-reach youth who “often lack healthy relationships with adults ... are typically disengaged from school and tend not to participate in constructive social activities” [12, p. 1]. Needless to say, some programs have found ways to address these issues, as recent research shows that these new adaptive programs demonstrate promise of helping these youth. Learning from these programs, especially research and evaluation conducted on them, may help to increase their numbers as an effective intervention strategy.

What Can You Do?

Research on general mentoring programs has found that “well-planned, well-run programs—programs that carefully screen, train, monitor, and support mentors so the matches are able to develop and endure—have positive effects” [10, p. 7]. According to *Mentoring: A Synthesis of P/PV’s Research 1988–1995*, effective mentoring programs share five basic elements:

1. Staff members require volunteers to understand the demands of mentoring and have a way of determining whether the mentor will behave appropriately.
2. New mentors receive training in how to conduct the relationship and what to do if challenges arise.
3. Program operators put care into matching young people with mentors.
4. Staff members conduct ongoing training and supervision of the relationships.
5. Staff members enjoy the flexibility to modify programs to address the needs of specific populations of mentors and youth [13].

For youth with a greater array of educational, vocational, and relational needs than those youth typically involved in mentoring programs, the need to modify some of these best practices may arise [12]. Recent research conducted by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), MENTOR, and others, demonstrates that mentoring programs that have modified their practices and procedures to meet the needs of higher risk youth have shown some signs of success. The components of these promising programs are discussed below.

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Collaborate With Stakeholders

When beginning any community- or facility-based intervention program, it is important to garner the support of and foster collaboration between all relevant stakeholders. Some mentoring sites funded under the National Faith-Based Initiative (NFBI), a program that implemented more than a dozen mentoring programs for high-risk youth, worked with local law enforcement and legal institutions such as probation/parole offices and the district attorney's office to funnel youth into the program [12]. For programs operated by juvenile corrections facilities, working with an intermediary group like MENTOR or BBBSA may prove a valuable strategy in aligning the goals of successful mentoring programs for delinquent youth with the realities of life in a correctional facility. These groups bring expert advice to the table, including technical assistance, and may help facilities with the necessary resources and dedicated staff needed for successful implementation of a mentoring program [8]. If the correctional agency has a planning group of stakeholders, it is wise to make the mentoring initiative a standing agenda item for that committee. Furthermore, P/PV evaluation reports have shown that

working with faith-based organizations and religious institutions may lead to successful facilitation of mentoring programs for youth who are delinquent or high risk. P/PV found that NFBI sites were able to "leverage their credibility as community leaders to establish partnerships with an array of juvenile justice agencies, social service providers, and other faith-based organizations" as well as provide a network of willing volunteer mentors [7, pp. 3, 24]. Finally, parents, family members, and other caretakers are valuable, vital stakeholders in programs designed for youth. With mentoring programs, as with other intervention strategies, family involvement may help programs better understand the needs and strengths of the youth involved and might make youth more receptive. Family members must be totally aware of how the initiative will be implemented and can facilitate understanding and cooperation of other family members. Mentoring programs specifically, however, should be aware of conflicts that may arise between mentors and family members, as family members may at times feel threatened by the relationship a mentor has with his or her child [10].

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Efficiently and Effectively Screen Mentors

Once the proper infrastructure and supports are in place, mentoring programs must then ensure the quality of the volunteers they have recruited. The BBBSA mentoring model includes a comprehensive screening process to assure that mentors are safe to work with youth. This process, however, is quite time consuming and was designed with younger youth in mind. NFBI sites working with older, higher risk youth found that using less rigorous screening strategies than other community-based models shortened the screening process and helped to

maintain volunteer interest. The elimination of some of the BBBSA procedures, such as home visits and psychological testing, allows the screening process to be completed in several weeks instead of several months and would allow volunteers to begin training soon after signing up (usually while waiting for criminal background checks to clear) [12]. However, many juvenile agencies require psychological testing and background checks of all volunteers, which must be honored to ensure due diligence for the safety of the young people in the mentoring.

Though possibly screened out of some mentoring programs, adults with a history of criminal activity and/or incarceration may actually be beneficial to a program working with youth who are delinquent or high risk. NFBI sites found that these mentors were especially able to effectively respond to the needs of youth in the juvenile justice system, as these youth may be better able to relate to someone who has had similar experiences [12]. NFBI sites did, however, require that mentors with criminal histories have at least a 5-year gap between last arrest or release from prison before mentoring youth [12, p. 15]. In any case, jurisdiction-specific regulations must always be considered, as some States or localities will ban participation of volunteers who were arrested for specific crimes such as those against other persons or that are drug related.

Provide Specific, Comprehensive, and Ongoing Training for Mentors

When asked how their mentoring experiences could have been improved, many of the respondents to MENTOR's 2005 poll replied that they would have liked to have been better

informed and more knowledgeable, as well as to have received better training [8]. P/PV's evaluation of NFBI mentoring sites found similar results, noting that "the more training mentors underwent, the more they reported feeling prepared" [12, p. 16]. This was a finding in the BBBSA research, as well. In fact, the majority of the mentors in these programs participated in at least 6 hours of training. Effective training may help the mentor to feel more comfortable entering into the mentoring relationship, and may help him or her better understand not only how to effectively interact with the mentee but also how best to operate within the mentoring program on the whole. While general training on what it means to be a mentor, including setting expectations and planning outcomes, is important, what is equally important when training mentors of youth who are delinquent or high risk is properly educating them about this population's unique needs and circumstances. The training implemented by several NFBI sites included, at minimum, "describing the barriers to successful development that the youth might have because of challenging family situations, educational deficits, difficulty relating to adults, or resolving conflict and anger resulting from their arrests or incarcerations" [12, p. 16]. One site's operators went one step further, conducting a session on the juvenile justice system, including taking a tour of a juvenile detention facility and showing a video about urban youth culture. Finally, programs should be prepared to offer training not only at the onset of the mentoring process, but also throughout as relationships evolve and the needs of both mentors and mentees change. The training should include topic-specific sessions including working with children/youth with emotional disorders; working with youth with educational disabilities; establishing and maintaining boundaries; and training on how

the adolescent brain works, even if the youth does not have any apparent disabilities.

Maintain Continuous Program Monitoring and Accountability Practices

Knowing and understanding the evolving mentoring process requires that programs continuously monitor their mentoring relationships and maintain a high level of accountability. Programs may choose to utilize staff members specifically for the process of communicating with mentors and mentees to gain their perceptions of how the relationship is proceeding and modify processes and procedures in order to facilitate quality interactions. Both mentors and mentees should enter the relationship with shared expectations, and both should be held accountable for working toward common goals and aspirations. According to P/PV, “the most significant difference between sites with more success and those with less involved the amount of intensive case management they offered” [12, p. 34]. Along the way, these expectations may change, and thus the focus of the mentoring relationship may need to be altered. It is important that this dynamic is understood and supported by mentoring programs for youth who are delinquent or high risk in order to build and sustain meaningful, positive relationships.

Focus on Building and Sustaining Positive Relationships

At least for some mentee populations, research has also demonstrated some correlation between the duration of a mentoring relationship and its overall success.³ Studies have shown that younger, “lower-risk youth begin to show benefits from mentoring after 6 months and more significant benefits after 12

months” [12, p. 31]. Research, however, has not established the length of time that older, higher risk youth must experience mentoring to see benefits, though one might assume that these youth may require a longer period of exposure to

mentoring before positive change occurs [12, p. 31]. In trying to explain this result, researchers have proposed that mentoring relationships of short duration “probably do not allow adequate time to develop the mutual trust and respect necessary for real growth to occur on the part of the mentee” [10, p. 34]. In evaluating the NFBI mentoring sites, P/PV found that both older and younger youth at high risk were less likely to stay in mentoring relationships [12]. For example, less than a quarter of youth who had been arrested two or more times or had other experiences in the juvenile justice system were likely to stay in mentoring relationships longer than 11 months [12, p. 33].

Engaging youth in a purposeful endeavor that he or she is interested in and one that the mentor is capable of assisting with may lead to longer lasting mentoring relationships, especially with youth who may be untrusting of or unreceptive to adults. As mentioned, these expectations and goals may change over the course of the relationship, and a mentor who is well-prepared to accommodate these changes is more likely to maintain the mentee’s interest and further develop the level of trust in the

“Relationships focused on developing trust and friendship are almost always more beneficial ... but a relationship focused purely on friendship may not be enough to redirect youth facing imprisonment, on the brink of school failure or [those] facing critical decisions about their futures. Mentors need to figure out how to work on these problems and goals while, at the same time, developing a trusting rapport with the youth.”

—Bauldry and Hartman

relationship. The research urges caution, however, in trying to elicit change too quickly in youth who are delinquent or high risk [12, p. 20]. Instead, the focus should be on gradually developing a close relationship that promotes positive behaviors as a means to reaching shared goals. One way to begin building a mentoring relationship with an older youth may be through a service project doing something the youth has expressed interest in. Such activities level the playing field and give both the mentee and mentor an opportunity to learn more about each other as they provide a service to someone else. Expectations on both ends must be realistic—mentees should be open to change, and mentors need to realize that they are neither therapists nor social workers and are there to form relationships, not “fix everything” [10, p. 31].

For incarcerated youth, a successful, long-lasting mentoring relationship may be valuable part of his or her transition back to the community. If a youth develops a close, trusting relationship with an adult and the adult is willing and able to continue the relationship after the youth has left the facility, the chances of that youth’s success could likely be improved. There is a need for expanded research, however, as very little research has been conducted to successfully track and

“Building trust with a child whom one has met through a programmatically arranged match can require patience and persistence.”

—Jucovy [10, p. 30]

evaluate these types of sustained mentoring relations. However, according to what we know from the field, it is clear that mentoring programs for youth who are delinquent or high risk should focus on properly preparing mentors for longer engagement

periods, continuously monitoring and supporting the mentoring relationships as they develop and evolve. Programs need to work to sustain mentoring relationships for as long as possible, throughout the ebbs and flows of both the mentors’ and mentees’ life circumstances.

The Federal Role

Over the past 15 years, the Federal Government has supported the role of mentoring in the lives of youth who are at risk,

“Mentoring is the 8th most frequent activity identified among the 41 types of activity identified in the 339 Federal programs that serve youth. Federal funding for targeted mentoring programs has increased in recent years, and the Bush Administration has indicated that ‘expansion of mentoring services for certain disadvantaged youth is a priority.’”

— Cooper [20, pp. 1,2]

high risk, and delinquent. Funding for both nationwide and regional mentoring programs has increased. The White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth: Final Report, released in October 2003, identified and listed about 123 federally funded programs with a mentoring component and enumerated 10 Federal agencies that administered these programs. Below is a description of the Federal Government’s largest scale mentoring program to date as well as its most recent grants specifically targeted at youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s Juvenile Mentoring Program (JUMP)

In 1992, the amending of Part G of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act of 1974 authorized the Office of Juvenile Justice

and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to fund the Juvenile Mentoring Program (JUMP). JUMP supported one-to-one mentoring programs for youth at risk of failing in school, dropping out of school, or becoming involved in delinquent behavior, including gang activity and substance abuse. To date, Congress has appropriated more than \$56 million to support these projects, and OJJDP has funded 203 JUMP sites in 47 States and 2 territories, providing more than 9,200 youth with mentoring relationships. Through JUMP, Congress provided the financial support for the collaboration between schools and community-based, nonprofit organizations to implement mentoring programs for at-risk youth [15].

To strengthen the mentoring capability of JUMP grantees, OJJDP funded the National Mentoring Center in Portland, OR, in 1998. The Center, a collaborative effort between the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, BBBSA, and P/PV, provides training and technical assistance, produces and distributes bulletins, and conducts regional training programs throughout the United States. Additional information about the Center may be found online at www.nwrel.org/mentoring.

Starting in 1997, OJJDP also funded a national evaluation of JUMP, conducted by Information Technology International (ITI). The purpose of the evaluation, which concluded in 2004, was to assess the status, effectiveness, and success of JUMP [15, p. 2]. ITI developed an evaluation framework that examined both process and outcome issues that examined the impact mentoring had on youth behavior and academic performance. In addition, ITI analyzed and identified effective practices in the mentoring field and developed data collection tools for gathering and tracking data from approximately

300 grantee programs [16]. Based on their findings to date, researchers have identified the following characteristics of successful JUMP projects:

- Supportive, collaborative relationships with schools and local education agencies (LEAs) in order to facilitate access to critical information (e.g., attendance records, academic performance, and dropout information) and lead to shared decisionmaking among the participating organizations.
- Thorough and extensive volunteer screening procedures to eliminate adults who are not likely to keep time commitments or who might pose a safety risk to youth.
- Mentor training in effective communication skills, limit-setting skills, relationship building, and strategies to interact successfully with youth.
- Matching procedures that use a professional case manager to analyze which mentor will work best with a particular youth, while taking into account the preferences of the youth, his or her family, and the volunteer.
- Intensive supervision of and support for each match through frequent contacts by a case manager with the parent/guardian, volunteer, and youth.
- Multiple strategies for recruiting mentors. Because recruitment can be difficult, projects should set realistic goals for the number of mentors to be recruited and ways in which matches will be made.
- A qualified and experienced project coordinator who is familiar with the target population and has an appropriate understanding of the community to maximize mentor recruitment opportunities.

Federal Grants for Mentoring System Involved Youth

In 2006, OJJDP released three grant solicitations for the purposes of mentoring youth involved in the juvenile justice system. The first of these, OJJDP's Mentoring Initiative for System Involved Youth, was established to "support the development and enhancement of mentoring programs for youth involved in the juvenile justice system, reentry, and foster care" [17, p. 3]. The initiative, which provides up to \$1.6 million to four mentoring partnerships over a 4-year period, seeks to "promote collaboration among community organizations and agencies committed to supporting mentoring services for system involved youth" [17, p. 3]. Its objective is to identify effective mentoring programs and determine how to enhance and expand these approaches for system involved youth.

The *Mentoring Initiative for System Involved Youth* program "seeks to serve as a catalyst to foster the collaboration of community involvement in developing and expanding mentoring programs to serve foster care, reentry, and system involved youth" [17, p. 4]. Grant recipients are expected to engage relevant segments of the community to support the development and expansion of mentoring programs. Sites are required to identify community stakeholders and incorporate them into a collaborative effort that will support the mentoring program.

A related grant, the *Training and Technical Assistance Program for Mentoring Initiative for System Involved Youth*, will provide up to \$500,000 to one center to provide training and technical assistance for the Mentoring Initiative

for System Involved Youth for a 2-year period [18]. The successful applicant for the program will be required to provide training and technical assistance to the four mentoring sites receiving awards, and facilitate the development and use of research-driven training and technical assistance materials by these demonstration sites. Grantees must also foster the use of effective program design elements; assist in identifying, implementing, and sustaining community partnerships; and strengthen communication and information sharing among the demonstration sites. Finally, the technical assistance provider must increase the number of adult volunteers and enhance the skills of volunteers and professionals working with these programs.

The final grant solicitation released in 2006 for OJJDP's *Mentoring Initiative for System Involved Youth* was the *Evaluation of Mentoring Initiative for System Involved Youth*. The 4-year, \$500,000 grant will support a program evaluation that will "assess the process and effect of mentoring programs for youth involved in the juvenile justice system, reentry, or foster care" [19].

Further information about these grants may be found at: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/funding/O6publish.htm>. As these grants are awarded, NDTAC will monitor the progress of each mentoring site as well as utilize the technical assistance and evaluation resources that are developed to better assist States and localities working to implement effective intervention strategies for youth who are

For More Information

For more information on mentoring and NDTAC, please visit the Center's Web site at: www.neglected-delinquent.org

Endnotes

¹ These outcomes were cited by Bauldry [7, p. 1].

² While there was no direct impact of mentoring on being rearrested, those youth who showed no signs of depression following their mentoring experience were 58 percent less likely to report being rearrested. Bauldry believes this demonstrates that mentoring “acts as a barrier to depression” and “may arguably have an indirect effect on recidivism” [7, p. 20].

³ See Grossman and Rhodes, 2002, [9] and Tierney, Grossman, and Resch, 1995 [14].

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