

Court-Ordered Mentoring Programs for Adjudicated Juveniles: When Should Youth be Referred?



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Abstract

Most mentoring programs target at-risk youth, but programs for those already adjudicated in the juvenile justice system have been less extensively studied. We examined the referral process, rates of program completion and recidivism for 97 mentored and 287 non-mentored youth on probation in a large, urban, Hispanic-dominated county. Youth who were referred to mentoring were already showing a pattern of technical violations on probation. As a result, mentored youth had higher odds of program failure and recidivism. Policy implications for mentoring programs for juvenile offenders include revisiting *when* youth are first referred to mentoring, better selection and more extensive training of adult mentors.

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Introduction

Mentoring programs for disadvantaged and at-risk youth have grown at a rapid pace over the last two decades. There are now over 5,000 mentoring programs serving about 3 million youths throughout the U.S. (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn & Valentine, 2011). Mentoring programs are interactive helping relationships between two individuals over an extended period, wherein an approved adult mentor develops trust, spends quality time, and passes along knowledge and skills to the mentee. Mentees are typically from disadvantaged family or neighborhood contexts, may show signs of emotional or behavioral problems and/or lack the social support to navigate maturation and development (Tolan, Henry, Schoeny, & Bass, 2008).

Compared to the number of programs for younger children who are at-risk of entering the juvenile justice system, mentoring programs for youth *already* in the system are rather scarce. Moreover, programs for justice system-involved youth might be expected to have a lower success rate than traditional programs, given that youth in the former are older and more likely committed to a delinquent identity or lifestyle. In large cities with high birthrates, and consequently, high delinquency rates, mentoring services might be relied upon to cover a broad spectrum of risk types from the younger status offenders to the older, more serious, and chronic offenders.

The current paper examines the referral process and outcomes of one mentoring program in a large Hispanic majority city with a large proportion of youth in their prime delinquency ages. We begin by addressing the theory and logic of mentoring prior to reviewing the literature on programs for system involved youth. We then analyze recidivism using data on mentored and non-mentored youth on probation within the same agency and discuss our findings in the context of policy.

The Theory and Logic Behind Mentoring

A variety of factors contribute to youth at risk of justice system involvement. These factors include alcohol and drug use, family violence, low parental involvement, poor school performance, and deviant peers. The protective factors against system involvement tend to be supportive relationships, positive recognition in school and having friends committed to conformity. The belief is that further escalation into more serious criminal involvement may be reduced if the ratio of protective factors was higher than the number of risk factors (Farrington, Loeber, Jolliffe, & Pardini, 2008). The logic of mentoring is that youth who are provided access to positive and

supportive role models can improve their emotional well-being and social development (Herrera, Sipe & McClanahan, 2000), but also help with academic achievement and reduce other problem behaviors. Regular meetings in an adult-youth mentor relationship can lead to engagement in beneficial activities (Parra, DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly, & Povinelli, 2002) and a deeper integration into the youth's social networks (Dubois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002).

Mentoring programs are thus designed for disadvantaged youth with little access to legitimate resources and high-status social networks. The youth are provided with guidance and support from adult mentors who are embedded in such networks, ultimately empowering the youth to gain access to these resources on their own (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). While many kinds of "institutional agents" can be effective, mentoring is theorized by some as the most likely method to actually change a mentee's path of behavior if they possess four critical characteristics. First, they must be aware of the social stratification issues that present barriers to resources and success. Second, they must possess the means of building the youths' social capital—i.e. links to people with the knowledge, skills, abilities, and social networks to help make the desired change in youth. Selected mentors who have high-status positions of authority and institutional ties (to schools, places of employment, etc.) can offer such resources. Third, mentors must be willing to be viewed by outsiders as "empowerment agents" or advocates for changing lives of disadvantaged youth. Finally, trust and reciprocity is important within any mentoring relationship for sustained behavior change (Stanton-Salazar 2011).

It is argued that mentoring programs make the most appreciable impact if they target youths who originate from disadvantaged neighborhoods and/or family environments, and if the program follows "best practices" outlined by MENTOR (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; DuBois, Doolittle, Yates, Silverthorn, & Tebes, 2006). This includes forming close and long-lasting bonds between the mentor and mentee (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). Mentoring programs have been extensively studied over the years with community-based programs like Big Brothers/Big Sisters, as well as in school-based settings that target students who are struggling academically or who have exhibited disruptive problems on school grounds. About 112 studies of mentoring programs were conducted between 1970 and 2005. These analyses concluded that mentoring relationships generally improved youth academic achievement and social development compared to youths who did not participate in a mentoring program (DuBois et al., 2011; Tolan et al., 2008). Much less is known about referral patterns to mentoring programs for adjudicated youths on probation.

Mentoring Programs for Adjudicated Youth

Mentoring programs for youths who have already come to the attention of the juvenile justice system are locally supervised through post-adjudication probation or parole supervision. In the case of probation, referrals to mentoring programs are typically recommended to the court by a probation officer and ordered by the judge. The mentor is an adult volunteer who is outside of the juvenile justice system. Youths in post adjudication mentoring programs are likely to have had problems in school and to be already involved in more serious and/or chronic delinquency than youths in school-based or traditional community-based programs. These youth may be on supervision for delinquency that is equivalent to a felony crime or have had repeated contacts with the juvenile justice system. Chronic offenders are defined in the literature as youth who accrue five or more arrests before the age of 18 (Loeber et al., 1998).

A review of the mentoring program literature revealed a small number of studies on programs for delinquent youths that used a comparison group in the evaluation (Anderson, 1977; Barnoski, 2002; Berger & Gold, 1978; Blechman, Maurice, Buecker, & Helberg, 2000; Bouffard & Bergseth, 2008; Jarjoura, 2009). In one of the earliest known studies, Anderson (1977) examined the likelihood of future delinquency with boys and girls who were found to be truant or delinquent. There were 76 mentored youth compared with 76 youth who did not receive mentoring. Anderson (1977) found that while the juveniles were in the program, mentoring reduced both the likelihood and severity of delinquent behavior, but there was no apparent post supervision follow-up. One year later, Berger and Gold (1978) examined three randomly assigned groups of juveniles on probation. One group received services such as volunteer mentoring, tutoring, and group counseling. The second group was referred for services but never participated. The third control group was not referred for services. The juveniles were tracked using four waves of self-reported delinquency and official police contacts for up to 12 months after probation and mentoring ended. The researchers concluded that volunteer mentoring had “negligible if not negative effects” on self-reported delinquency (Berger & Gold, 1978, p. 332).

Research on mentoring programs for adjudicated youth did not appear to resurface until over two decades later. Forty-five youths mentored while in a diversion program for misdemeanants and first-time felons were compared with 137 diverted youths who were not mentored. The two groups were followed for 30 months after beginning the diversion program, and the researchers detected that 51% of the mentored youth and 46% of the control group were rearrested, with no significant differences between the groups (Blechman et al. 2000).

Barnoski and colleagues (2002) examined confined juveniles who were returning to the community and followed 78 mentored offenders, comparing them with 78 non-mentored offenders for 12 months after release. They determined that 23% of the mentored youth and 35% of the control group were reconvicted after 12 months. A similar approach was taken by Roger Jarjoura in a program he implemented in Indiana in 1997 (Jarjoura, 2009). Youthful offenders who were released from Plainfield juvenile correctional facility were randomly assigned to one of three groups: pre-release preparation with an individually assigned mentor; pre-release planning without a mentor; and a control group that received no services. While the first group that received both the pre-release and the mentoring services had the lowest recidivism rates of all three groups, that difference was most pronounced four years after release (reincarceration rate after 4 years was 44%, 50% and 62% respectively). Youth who agreed to work closely in a sustained relationship with their assigned mentor had a 28% reincarceration rate after four years (Jarjoura, 2009). This study showed that mentoring was even more important for youth classified as high-risk.

A recent study by Bouffard and Bergseth (2008) measured court contacts for delinquency of boys and girls who were placed out of their home and were adjudicated for a misdemeanor or felony. The mentoring program incorporated paid adult mentors as part of a reentry program, and the findings were compared to traditional probationers. The authors examined service delivery as well as outcome measures, including time to first new offense and number of new official contacts within six months' release. Results indicated that well-implemented reentry programs can work and that paid professional mentors could contribute to strengthening prosocial bonds compared to those on traditional probation. Of the 63 mentored youth, 29% had a new court contact, compared to 43% of the 49 youth in the comparison group. Like many of the previous studies, the group differences were not statistically significant, likely due to small sample size.

The Current Study

In the current study, we examined program completion and recidivism for two groups of youthful offenders on probation in a large, urban county juvenile justice agency in the Southwest. The jurisdiction choice was based upon data availability and a previous collaborative relationship between the probation department and University researchers. One group was referred to a mentoring program after accruing a number of technical probation violations. The second group was also on probation but was not referred to mentoring. The mentoring program was part of

the volunteer unit of the juvenile probation department. The agency has administered mentoring programs since the late 1990s, but it first began keeping electronic records in 2004. According to agency literature and information obtained in interviews with administrators, any youth aged 10 through 17 under the agency's supervision may be referred to mentoring by their probation officer. However, our study shows that in practice, the program was used primarily in response to a pattern of technical violations.

The mentoring program carefully screened, trained, and matched adults with youth based on gender and their preferences on various criteria such as interests in sports, the arts, music, and other leisure activities. Volunteers passed a background check, an interview, made a qualifying score on the Minnesota Multi-Phasic Inventory (MMPI), and completed an orientation. The age, education level and occupations of mentors ranged greatly, but most mentors were college students and other community members in their 20s and 30s. Participants were required to meet at least one hour per week for a minimum of four months, with a preferred duration of twelve-months. Mentors and mentees participate in recreational, educational, and social activities of mutual interest. The probation department assisted the volunteer in minimizing out of pocket expenses by providing food coupons and admission tickets to amusement parks, sporting events, and other recreational or entertainment activities.

Method

De-identified secondary data were provided by the juvenile probation agency and cleared through a University institutional review board. All youth in the study had been adjudicated as delinquent by the juvenile court sometime between 2005 and 2009. The mentored group originally consisted of 158 cases, pooled from five years of data on youth who were court-ordered to participate in a mentoring program as a condition of probation. Youths who were referred, but did not spend a minimum of two weeks in mentoring were removed from the sample, so that the final sample size of youth in the mentoring group was 97.

We estimated the sample size needed to obtain 95 percent confidence intervals on inferential statistics (assuming 1.96 Z, five percent error rate, and .05 p-value), to be 384. We selected all mentored youth (n = 97) and a comparison group of n = 287 to meet this required sample size. . The 287 comparison group cases were selected at random from a population of 8,148 juvenile probationers under supervision who did not receive mentoring services, but who participated as

regular probationers in court-ordered conditions that varied by each individual case. We have a complete dataset with no missing data on variables in the analysis.

Variables

There were five specific outcomes examined for both groups in the study. The first outcome was program completion (1 = successful completion; 0 = non-completion). Interim program behaviors are defined as the time period from the program start date up to one year, and are broken down into technical violations (1 = yes; 0 = no) and rearrest for a new crime (1 = yes; 0 = no). The fourth and fifth outcome variables are post-program technical violations (1 = yes; 0 = no) and post-program rearrest (1 = yes; 0 = no); both which track cases for one year after program termination date.

The main variable of interest in the regression model is whether the youth belonged to the mentoring sample or the comparison group. The duration in the court ordered program was important to document the length of program exposure measured in number of days. Control items in the model included the referral offense (status offense, violation of probation, misdemeanor, felony),⁴ the number of prior arrests, and the number of prior technical violations accrued up to the latest court referral. Sex was coded as 1 for male and 0 for female. Age represented the age at intake to mentoring or to probation program (for the comparison group).

Analytical Approach

Tests for significant differences between mentored and non-mentored groups were calculated for all items in the analysis. Then, since program completion (success/failure) and all forms of recidivism (yes/no) were binary, we used logistic regression to examine the effect of mentoring on our various outcomes, controlling for criminal history and demographic variables. Our policy recommendations focus on the types of referrals made to mentoring programs in large, racial minority communities, and the suitability of mentoring programs to meet the needs of youth probation violators.

⁴ Status offense is the excluded category in regression.

Findings

Table 1 shows the differences between the mentoring and comparison groups relative to the dependent variables. Both groups were mainly comprised of Latino boys who were an average of 15 years old. Given that the city has a Hispanic population of 65%, this finding is expected. Mentored youth were considerably younger than the comparison group by about eight months. The proportion of females in mentoring was significantly higher, and the proportion of black youth in mentoring was significantly lower than that of the comparison group.

The prior number of arrests and technical violations were very different for the two groups. The mentoring group averaged 2.1 prior arrests, while the comparison group had a mean prior arrest of 0.34. The youth referred to mentoring averaged five technical violations for every one technical violation committed by the comparison group. The mentored group's rate of accruing technical violations during the program was also nearly three times higher than that of non-mentored youth. Probation violations in general were higher for the comparison group, however (known as "paper" or "no arrest" referrals to court in the agency). The mentored group's re-arrest rate for new crimes during the mentoring program was three times higher than that of the comparison group. The mentoring group also had a post program rearrest rate of new crimes that was four times higher than the comparison group. It should be noted that the proportion of Black or White youths within the analytic sample is small compared to Hispanic youths (6.2% and 10.3%, respectively vs. 83.5% Latino).

Table 1 Sample Descriptives and t-tests by Group Status

Variable	Mentored (n = 97)		Non-Mentored (n = 287)		t-value
	%	Mean (SD)	%	Mean (SD)	
Did not complete program	36.1	--	34.5	--	-.28
Interim Rearrest	30.9	--	10.1	--	5.07**
Post program re-Arrest	22.7	--	5.6	--	5.02**
Interim Tech Violations	26.8	--	9.8	--	4.26**
Post program Technical Violations	8.2	--	6.3	--	.67
Status Offense	19.6	--	21.3	--	-.35
Violation of probation	19.6	--	31.0	--	-2.17**
Misdemeanor	40.2	--	28.9	--	2.07*
Felony	20.6	--	18.8	--	.39
# Prior Arrests	--	2.10 (1.98)	--	.34 (.61)	13.2**
# Prior Technical Violations	--	.23 (.586)	--	.04 (.22)	4.51**
# Days in program	--	128.14 (95.84)	--	123.34 (98.72)	.42
Age	--	14.89 (1.421)	--	15.50 (1.152)	-4.25**
Male	63.9	--	87.1	--	-5.22**
White	10.3	--	10.1	--	.06
Black	6.2	--	13.9	--	-2.04**
Latino/a	83.5	--	76.0	--	1.55*

*P <.05, **P < .01

Table 2 contains logistic regression results examining the effect associated with mentoring group membership on five specific recidivism outcomes. Youth in mentoring experienced significantly higher odds of both interim and post-program rearrest. Mentoring group membership did not have a significant effect on program completion or technical violation compared to youth on other (non-mentoring) case-plans. Mentored youth were over three times as likely to be rearrested in the first program year, and three times as likely to be rearrested out to one year following program participation.

The control variables that significantly decreased the odds of program completion were being placed on probation for a felony and the number of prior arrests. These relationships were consistent with past research showing that prior criminal history and severity of the adjudicated offense both affect likelihood of successfully completing a probation sentence (Bechtold and Caufmann, 2011). While others suspect that race and social class may condition these relationships (Smith, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2009), our largely Latino sample and the lack of SES data precluded such tests.

The number of days on probation exhibited a significant, positive relationship with interim rearrests. That is, as the number of days in the program increased, so did the likelihood of rearrest during probation. Age of the juvenile was significant with odds of re-arrest, in that younger juveniles were more likely to be rearrested both during and after probation than older juveniles. Age was also significant in the same direction with respect to technical violations committed both during probation and after mentoring ended. Finally, the number of prior arrests significantly increased the odds of interim technical violations.

Table 2 Logistic regression of Mentoring and control variables on recidivism (n = 384)

Variable	Program Completion		Interim Arrests		Post Program Arrests		Interim Technical Viol.		Post Program Technical Viol.	
	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio
Mentoring	.369 (.352)	1.447	1.135** (.413)	3.111	1.137* (.484)	3.117	.498 (.462)	1.645	.012 (.627)	1.012
Referral Offense										
Status Offense	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Violation of Probation	-.640 (.333)	.527	.270 (.463)	1.310	-.713 (.580)	2.041	.405 (.427)	1.499	.038 (.627)	1.039
Misdemeanor	-.516 (.344)	.597	-.214 (.437)	.807	-.171 (.555)	.843	-.782 (.427)	.457	-1.074 (.614)	.342
Felony	-.846* (.362)	.429	-.286 (.522)	.751	.518 (.612)	1.678	-.233 (.516)	.789	-.535 (.672)	.586
Number of Prior Arrests	-.275** (.105)	.760	.098 (.126)	1.103	.192 (.140)	1.211	.326** (.123)	1.385	.105 (.191)	1.111
Number of Prior Violations	-.236 (.310)	.760	-.589 (.550)	.555	-.833 (.687)	.435	.345 (.337)	1.412	-.280 (.725)	.756
Number of days in program	-.001 (.001)	.999	.004** (.001)	1.004	.002 (.002)	1.002	.001 (.002)	1.001	-.003 (.003)	.998
Age at referral	-.055 (.102)	.946	-.509** (.125)	.601	-.536** (.139)	.585	-.310* (.129)	.733	-.461** (.158)	.631
Gender										
Female (ref)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Male	-.416 (.314)	.660	.261 (.401)	1.298	.073 (.462)	1.076	.308 (.428)	1.361	.493 (.601)	1.637
Cox & Snell r-square	.054		.125		.101		.095		.031	

**p < .01

Discussion

Mentoring programs have generally had a positive impact on youth at-risk. As a result, mentoring has expanded to include youth adjudicated as delinquent by the juvenile courts. However, the relatively small number of studies on programs of this type present mixed findings or negligible results at best. In the current study, referral to mentoring was often made after the initial adjudication. The average youth in the mentoring group had previously been adjudicated on probation and had not fared well, after having committed a series of technical violations while on supervision before being assigned to a mentor.

Given the lack of cogent findings in the probation literature regarding the salient social and legal correlates of success or failure in juvenile probation (Clark 1998), this study is exploratory with the use of mentoring leading to probation completion and recidivism reduction. We acknowledge that the average number of prior arrests and technical violations for mentored youth was significantly higher than for the non-mentored youth prior to entrance into the program. About 13 percent of the offenders in the mentoring sample could be classified as chronic and an additional 28 percent were above the total sample mean (i.e. had 3 or 4 prior arrests). Only about one percent of the comparison group had more than three prior arrests. Given these group differences, we cannot draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the mentoring program per se.

What our study does show, however, is that mentoring was seemingly not able to change the trajectory of youth who had already begun a distinct pattern of technical violations on probation. While this was only an initial exploration of the types of youth being referred to mentoring programs in a large, urban, minority context, it appears that additional modeling is warranted to more fully explore the point at which mentoring can be more effective. Indeed, criminal history is both a legally and socially relevant control item, as it picks up the effects of deviant predisposition (latent traits), state dependence (environmental influences), and official labeling effects (police familiarity with youth or computerized recall of arrest history in the field). In short, while a number of social variables not measured here may be correlates of the recidivism outcomes (e.g. family and peer influences, difficulties in school), it is plausible that criminal history accounts for a significant amount of probation success and study outcomes.

This study suggests that referral to mentoring should take place earlier in the post adjudication process, such as at the beginning of the probation term rather than waiting to assign mentors to youths who are beginning to fail on probation.

We must also consider that the mentoring program itself may require some changes in structure and approach. For example, it is possible that the mentor recruitment and training are more suited to a program designed to target diversionary or first time offenders rather than more serious or chronic youths with prior arrests. In mentoring programs for serious and high-risk youth, it seemed that the training the mentors received in Indianapolis was much more intense and related to teaching them life skills than one might find in most community-based mentoring programs (Jarjoura, 2009).

While it is widely recognized that youth who could benefit most from mentoring are those deemed at-risk of becoming more serious offenders (DuBois et al., 2006; Hanlon, Bateman, Simon, O'Grady, & Carswell, 2002; Herrera et al., 2002; Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002), youth accepted into the program in the current study were court-ordered to participate and their offense histories ranged between first-time misdemeanors and chronic offenders. Therefore, another basic question is to what extent mentoring programs should be court ordered. Since trust is the foundation of any mentoring relationship, we have to wonder about the degree to which youths that were court-ordered to a mentoring program actually wanted to reciprocate. We did not collect this type of data, but future research may wish to consider the degree to which youths on probation trusted their mentors and were willing to work toward sustained behavior change.

Mentor Training and Preparation

We noted that some of the undesirable effects on re-arrest seen in the regression model *might* be a reflection of a training deficiency or lack of quality control in the program itself. For example, the eligibility requirements for volunteer mentors at the agency and the training provided were quite minimal. Qualified mentors received an overview of the volunteer handbook and an explanation of the mentoring program via a four-hour training and orientation. Having become a mentor with the agency, one of the current authors observed that most mentors had limited experience working with delinquent youth. If mentoring programs are used with adjudicated youth, the substance of the training may wish to follow the protocol in the AIM training initiative with juveniles reentering aftercare (Jarjoura, 2009). We offer that mentoring programs for adjudicated youth should collaborate with a community college or public university, due to the fact that faculty and students are likely to possess the knowledge, skills, abilities, and social networks to help youth make the desired changes in their lives (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

The most consistent finding with both groups in the current study is that the odds of recidivism decreased with age. Our study is with an age group that precedes the typical aging-out process, so we are less confident as to whether this desistance will continue into adulthood. Some have shown delinquency is more pronounced in the early teen years (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003), while others have observed a peak in offending in mid-to-late adolescence (e.g. Henry, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 2001). Recent official arrest data show that with the exception of a slight drop for age 15, the proportion of youth arrested in the U.S. increases up to age 18 and beyond (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012). A similar pattern of linear increase in arrest (with age) was also observed in some juvenile arrest studies (e.g. Butts & Snyder, 2006). About 50 percent of our sample was comprised of 16 and 17 year olds, so our age-related finding may be a function of some youth achieving the age of majority during the study and therefore no longer tracked by the juvenile court.

Study Limitations

Given that the mentoring group was so fundamentally different from the comparison group on prior arrests and technical violations, conducting a program evaluation was not possible. Another limitation was the lack of socioeconomic data to further isolate the effects of mentoring on recidivism. Future work should account for socioeconomic status, as poverty tends to drive youth to the street where they are differentially exposed to crime and deviant cultural practices (Hagan & McCarthy, 1992; Payne & Brown, 2010). Impoverished areas are often saturated by police patrol, and youth receive differential treatment if they live in these areas, or if they are perceived to be poor by police (Kirk & Matsueda, 2011; Tapia, 2010).

Justice-based agencies that refer a diverse base of juvenile offenders to mentoring would benefit from more intensive programming (Lane et al., 2005), which would require more resources to accommodate the higher risk youth. This will have implications for the volunteer pool selected to work with youth and the training mentors receive. Finally, to address the issue about measuring program quality, a mixed methods approach might help to gain a more thorough understanding of program dynamics. Pairing these insights with the type of quantitative findings contained herein could lead to the most effective manner of reframing a mentoring program that would begin to reduce recidivism in the youth it serves.

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