

LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FROM A CROSS-SITE EVALUATION OF MENTORING WITH SYSTEM-INVOLVED YOUTH

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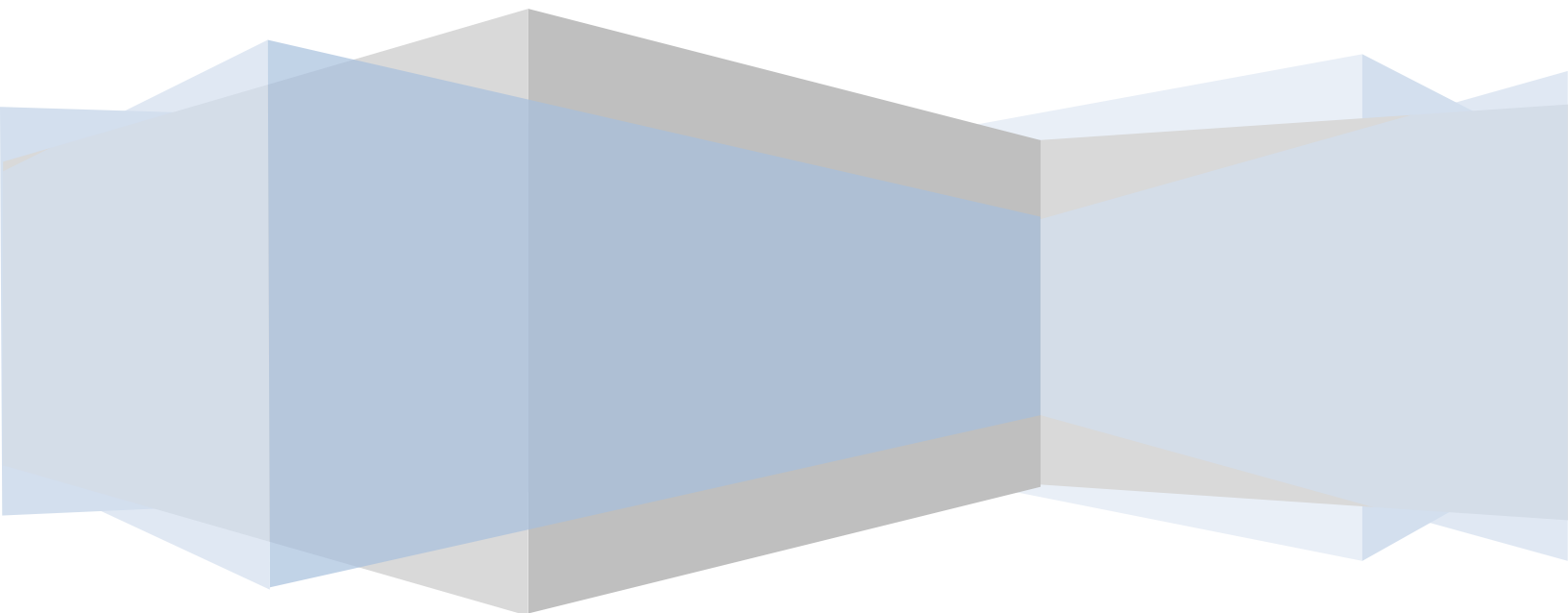


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INTRODUCTION

Mentoring has received a great deal of attention in recent years for its promise as a method of promoting positive youth development among at-risk youth. Promising outcomes for mentoring programs with children (aged 8 and up) in programs like Big Brothers, Big Sisters have generated interest in testing the efficacy of mentoring with youth at higher risk and youth in foster care or in the juvenile justice system. One of the challenges for mentoring programs, and potential providers, however, is that “mentoring” is not a well-defined construct. Over the last few years, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has funded research to understand if system-involved youth can be predictably and positively influenced by having a mentor and which program factors and foci are critical to decreasing the likelihood of delinquency and to helping youth thrive and become positive and productive community

members. The study we conducted—evaluating four diverse mentoring programs with foster care and adjudicated youth—is one such study.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) currently broadly defines mentoring as “a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support, and encouragement developing the competence and character of the mentee.”

In this bulletin, we draw on our recent experience evaluating four **Mentoring Initiative for System-involved Youth (MISY)** projects. First, we discuss the various interpretations of mentoring as a construct, including some of the newer theoretical constructs that may help us think more precisely about the differences we observe in programs. We then discuss the types of mentoring involved in the four MISY projects studied. Because all of us learn as much by knowing what does *not* work as what does work, we discuss the challenges of evaluating new or evolving mentoring programs run by small nonprofit agencies and challenges with implementing rigorous quasi-experimental evaluation designs within evolving human services settings. We also discuss the practical challenges of data collection at understaffed or underfunded programs and difficulties that arise when self-report instruments are used with youths who have trust issues. We will highlight those findings

that offer promising outcomes and practices, particularly focusing on our assessment of the strength and quality of matches. Included are program recommendations drawn from qualitative observations conducted as part of our project, from our quantitative data, and from our literature research that are important for designing and implementing effective mentoring programs to maximize the positive effect of mentoring on youth. We will suggest further exploration of

several issues that appear to contribute to the quality of mentor-mentee relationship, including the effects of mentee age, length of mentoring, dosage level, program purpose, focus and authorship, organizational capacity, and mentor training and support.

BACKGROUND: DEFINING “MENTORING”

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “mentor” (the noun) as “a *trusted* counselor or guide.” Historically, in Europe and early America, a mentor was a person with more experience in a trade, craft, or profession that a youth or a young adult chose early in his or her career as a guide. “To mentor”, as a verb, means “to tutor or coach,” which speaks more to the content or the skills to be acquired than to the nature or quality of the relationship.

Mentoring as a form of prevention dates back to the late 19th century, when the Friendly Visiting campaign recruited hundreds of middle class women to work with poor and immigrant communities (Freedman, 2008). Early in the 20th century Irvin Westheimer, a Cincinnati businessman recruited fellow business colleagues to mentor disadvantaged boys without fathers. He helped redefine the purpose of mentoring: “to provide friendship, emotional support, and guidance to youth through their involvement with positive role models.” With the work of Bandura and Walters (1963), and other social-learning theorists in the 1950s and 1960s, the field had better theoretical explanations as to why each child should be assured at least one healthy social role model in his or her life to help prevent delinquency and to have a chance to thrive.

The OJJDP mentoring website offers a definition of mentoring, as “A relationship over a prolonged period of time between two or more people where an older, caring, more experienced individual provides help to the younger person as [he or she] goes through life.”

From a different perspective, one of the youths participating in one of the four MISY projects study defined mentoring as “Having someone who makes you feel special.” That definition seems to be a critical prerequisite to other positive outcomes of mentoring because it speaks to the way mentors (or for that matter, any adult) help to motivate and guide a youth. Although these definitions have the same common theme, the differences show mentoring as a broad and elastic construct. Some mentoring models are strongly developmental and relational with different levels of skill building specific activities. Other mentoring models seem to emphasize goal directed and even prescriptive curriculum (such as a “life skills course”) to the extent of limiting the collaborative decision making and opportunity of mentees and mentors and deemphasizing purely relationship building activities (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010). The exact definitions and purposes of mentoring varied across the four programs we evaluated, although all sought to reduce future delinquency as an outcome. Consequently, we looked at mentoring broadly, as a protective factor for youths. Further, we studied the quality of the relationships that emerged and the effectiveness of those relationships with the system-involved youth under study.

MENTORING WITH SYSTEM-INVOLVED YOUTH

Providing system-involved youth with mentors seems like a promising evidence-based strategy for deterring juvenile crime, especially when combined with other resources. In their comprehensive 2010 report *Improving the Effectiveness of Juvenile Justice Programs; A New Perspective on Evidence Based Strategies*, Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Chapman, and Carver (2010) reported on a meta-analysis of several studies of juvenile intervention programs that contributed to the reduction of recidivism. Though some non-mentoring intervention programs reviewed had a negative effect on youth with low or moderate levels of risk, Lipsey et al. found that mentoring was one of the early interventions that showed the greatest promise, with a mean 22 percent reduction in recidivism for justice-system-involved youth across the studies analyzed.

A common theme for system-involved and foster-care youths is a lack of relationships with highly functional, consistent, and loving adult role models. It is important to note that foster-care youths are in the system for many reasons, including physical and sexual abuse, inability of parents to care for or control them, homelessness, and other reasons beyond a young person's control. Unfortunately, outcomes for many foster-care youths as adults are poor. According to Ziotnick, Tam, and Soman (2012 [Epub Jan 19, 2012]), foster-care youths have more than twice the average odds of being on Social Security Disability for problems with physical or emotional health, are more likely to be unemployed, and have a higher prevalence of homelessness.

Both types of system-involved youths need a caring and resourceful adult to stand by them through their difficult life choices and transitions. Some youths may find this person within their families, schools, churches, or afterschool programs. One model for this support is a designated mentor/advocate who may serve as a positive role model as well as an ally for a youth in dealing with schools, courts, and the foster-care system. Some mentors may have been in foster care or involved with the criminal justice system. Although there is no single solution to reduce the complex risk factors that increase the likelihood of a youth engaging in delinquent behavior, mentoring is embraced as a possible protective factor. Social learning theorist Rutter (1987) believes that protective factors “offset the onset of delinquency via four main processes: (a) reducing risk, (b) reducing negative chain reactions, (c) establishing self-esteem and self-efficacy, and (d) opening up opportunities.” Mentors and other adult allies can certainly assist with all four of these processes.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2006, OJJDP funded four projects as part of the MISY program. These projects were run by nonprofit or quasi-governmental entities. The Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) designed and implemented a participatory cross-site evaluation of these programs. The following four program grantees were evaluated:

- The Aftercare Academy (Oakland, California)
- The Economic Mentoring Program (EMP; Chicago, Illinois)
- Mentor Match (Hampton, Richmond, and Winchester, Virginia)
- Mentor Portland (Portland, Oregon)

The four programs studied were located across the United States and served two primary types of youths: those involved in the foster-care system and those involved in the juvenile justice system or at high risk of being involved in the juvenile justice system. Both these populations of youth were considered by OJJDP to be “system-involved youth.” Two of the programs served system-involved youth only and were for males only aged 12 to 18 years. The other two programs served high-risk male and female youths as determined by their involvement in the foster-care system. The four programs shared a common goal of providing mentoring relationships for youths that would enhance their ability to have positive outcomes in their lives and deter risk behaviors. Despite sharing a common goal, important programmatic differences existed across the four programs, including the maturity of their mentoring efforts.

The Aftercare Academy in California used a curriculum they called a “Transformative Mentoring Model” with 15- to 18-year-old males who were wards of the court and who had been sentenced to spend 6 to 12 months in a California Youth Camp for nonviolent offenses. The highly structured, long-term, curriculum-based group model was executed with two paid professional caseworker/mentors from The Mentoring Center. The caseworkers provided support and transitional programming for youths that began while they were still in pre-release status. The focus was on life skills training, anger management, character and spiritual development, and job training.

The goal of the Economic Mentoring Program (EMP) in Illinois was to help Chicago youth avoid delinquency through promoting educational and financial success by focusing on business and entrepreneurship in Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods, which have high rates of high-school dropouts and unemployment. Based in the philosophy of restorative justice, the program sought to promote individual and social responsibility, as well as developing financial goal setting, decision making, and economic empowerment. Participants were males in grades 8 through 10 who were first-time or non-serious offenders. The EMP program used volunteer mentors, and mentees had to meet certain requirements to participate, such as attending school.

The Mentor Match Program in Virginia was a new mentoring project within the MISY program by Lutheran Family Services of Virginia. Participating youth aged 9 to 18 were referred by either Social Services or the Virginia Juvenile Court Offices and were required to spend at least 1 hour per week with mentors. The program’s focus was to improve social and vocational skills, promote healthy and positive decision making, and develop good relationships with foster parents and other family members. Mentor Match attempted to establish the program at multiple sites in Virginia.

The Boys and Girls Aid Society, which has experience in mentoring children with incarcerated parents, developed and implemented the Mentor Portland program in Oregon specifically to serve high-risk and foster-care youth under the OJJDP grant. This program focused on ensuring that all mentors feel supported and trained for the mentoring experience. Mentor Portland was a strength-based program that sought to develop self-esteem, resiliency, and life skills through the establishment of a healthy, stable adult relationship. It also focused on developing cross-cultural understandings and provided diversity training. Program activities combined one-to-one mentoring with structured meetings, community activities, and semiannual weekends with mentors at outdoor ropes courses. Home visits by staff were part of the match process.

The programs varied in the case management and program activities that they provided to the matches. Programs recruited and matched youths and mentors for differing periods ranging from 1 up to 3 years. The number of youth recruited by the four programs during the MISY project ranged from 35 reported by the EMP in Illinois to 83 reported by Mentor Match in Virginia. The mean age of youths at intake ranged from 11.0 years (Oregon) to 16.4 years (California). Most youths were African American (46 percent at Oregon; 79 percent at California). Caucasian youths were the next largest group served, with 11 percent in Virginia and 28 percent in Oregon. Sites also reported serving a few youths who reported Hispanic, Asian, or “other” races or ethnicities.

EVALUATION DESIGN

In this study, we were particularly interested in assessing mentor-mentee closeness that Dubois et al. (2006) identified as an important factor in mentee outcomes. Our cross-site evaluation looked at mentor-mentee closeness and match quality as a predictive factor for sustaining mentor-mentee relationships long enough for the protective factors and resiliency building to take place and to provide immediate support for current problems. Closeness and match quality are essential for system-involved youths who often have a significant history of having been disappointed or abandoned (physically or emotionally) by adults in their lives. It is particularly important for a mentor of system-involved youth not to be another disappointing adult. Strength of match was defined for mentors and mentees using a series of constructs developed by Harris and Nakkula (2003), including perceptions of mentor-mentee closeness and emotional sharing.

The evaluation of the MISY project was initially designed to use a two-group quasi-experimental evaluation design with repeated measures over 15 months. In practice, because the programs were small, nonprofit organizations, it was not feasible to recruit and engage a comparison group. Additionally, recognizing the types of organizations being studied, we incorporated the principles of empowerment evaluation to engage and involve site staff in the research process as much as possible and build their future capacity for self-evaluation. “Empowerment Evaluation” (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005) asserts that evaluation is of more value to program

improvement if the stakeholders and staff take an active role in determining their own definitions of successful outcomes and measures and are actively engaged in data collection.

INSTRUMENTS AND MEASURES

To study the quality and progress of the mentor-mentee relationships, the research design included two surveys each for both the youth and the mentors with the goal of understanding who they are, the expectations they brought to the mentoring experience and how each relationship was progressing from the perspective of both the mentor and mentee.

This information about mentees was to be collected beginning at baseline (3 months after the match), at 9 months, and for one program, at 15 months post intake. Mentees completed two surveys. The first, a *MISY Youth Behavior Survey and Youth Background* questionnaire, is a two part survey adapted by PIRE from a variety of sources. These include survey scales on the Attitude toward Delinquency from the Pittsburgh Youth Study/Rochester Youth Development Study (Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1998), and a self-esteem scale (DuBois, Felner, Brand, Phillips, & Lease, 1996). We also included standard questions about past 30 day, drug, alcohol and tobacco use.

Secondly, a mentee *Quality of Match Survey* (Harris & Nakkula, 2003) was collected at 3 months and updated at 9 to 15 months or within the evaluation period. Questions included on the *Quality of Match Survey* were drawn from instruments used successfully in previous mentoring evaluations, especially from Harris and Nakula (2003). The *Quality of Match Survey* included questions about how the match made them feel and the focus on activities. The relational quality and instrumental scale asks questions about how the mentor makes them feel (special, cares); how quickly they hit it off; how close they have become; how much the mentor focuses on fun versus specific goals (school, career, interpersonal); and who determines the activities, level of sharing, skill building, and other details of relationship quality and type. This instrument has scales focusing on relationship satisfaction-dissatisfaction, intimacy, youth centeredness, growth focus, and relationship focus.

Mentors completed a *Mentor Background Survey* at baseline and a *Mentor Match Survey* (adapted from Harris & Nakkula, 2003) at 3 months into the match and periodically throughout the evaluation period. *Mentor Match Survey* subscales included the mentor's assessments of closeness-distance, satisfaction, compatibility, intellectual/academic development, emotional sharing, parental support, and program support.

Although the number of surveys returned at the 3-, 9-, or 15-month data-collection intervals was disappointing, most of the programs indicated that between a fourth and a third of the youths who enrolled in one of the MISY programs never became really invested in their mentoring matches, often skipping events and meetings. However, most youth participated actively, and each MISY program had some matches that continued beyond their program involvement.

CHALLENGES: THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROGRAM ISSUES ON EVALUATION

The four MISY programs we evaluated had diverse organizational structures, missions, staffing patterns, governance priorities, philosophies of change, and very importantly, styles of leadership. In many respects, the MISY programs are probably representative of the larger universe of mentoring programs focusing on at-risk youth. These cross-project differences, and the early implementation stage of two mentoring programs, made consistent and standardized cross-site data collection and meaningful comparison a challenge. At the beginning of the grant period, only two of the organizations had formal experience with mentoring and the required infrastructure (recruitment, training, and supervision) for a mentoring program—and even those were adapted for use with different populations and curricula for this project. Because mentoring seems like a straightforward intervention to develop and implement, it is not surprising that these and other small nonprofit organizations might think a mentoring program can be readily implemented. However, all phases of the program implementation process including recruitment, training, curriculum development, and continuing support for matches need more staff support and fiscal resources than might be obvious to an organization that has no experience with implementing mentoring interventions.

Two of our MISY programs experienced fiscal problems because the OJJDP funding was unable to fund all their program costs and other charitable funders were disappearing during the 2008-10 national recession. Because the MISY programs were being implemented by small, developing nonprofit organizations, the requirement to participate in a required cross-site evaluation after their programmatic funding had been received posed a challenge for the evaluation. The evaluation team needed to obtain its buy-in somewhat “after the fact” of the program design. Thus, we tried to accommodate both their programmatic needs and the evaluation design using empowerment evaluation principles (Fetterman and Wandersman, 2005). It was therefore only possible to generalize minimally from the collective assets and challenges of the four MISY programs studied. One goal was to track mentor-mentee relationships of up to 15 months to evaluate the influence of mentor-mentee closeness on youth outcomes. Among these projects, only the EMP program in Illinois made and sustained many relationships for 15 months. The largest program, Mentor Match of Virginia, only maintained matches for an average of 5 months due to staff and funding shortages. However, all programs reported that at least some matches continued beyond 12 months.

Because two of the MISY projects were just setting up their mentoring programs at the beginning of the funding, it was some time before matches were made and baseline data could be collected. We found that differences in organizational experience in providing mentoring services also reflected significant differences in experience with collecting data. Each of the four projects had different levels of experience and expertise with the professional administration of

evaluation surveys, including explaining the confidentiality and the importance of candid versus “socially desirable” responses, and with collecting process data (e.g., the frequency and length of matches and reasons for termination). Shortage of available staff with time dedicated to data monitoring and collection was an issue at all sites. We also found that programmatic differences across the four MISY programs resulted in the definition of “baseline” being different for each program. Due to start-up difficulties with providing mentoring services and inexperience with ascertaining the viability of the matches with mentees who did not appear to be highly engaged, some of the MISY programs collected baseline data at the time of a match, and others waited to collect baseline data until the match was well established, and they were certain it would continue.

Trust is a significant issue for many of these youths because of poor experiences with adults and the systems involved. Their functional understanding of confidentiality or anonymity is limited. Many MISY youths were used to being blamed for what they said or did and opted for socially desirable responses or no response. This created problems associated with youth self-reports at baseline. The MISY youths had not yet built strong relationships with their programs or mentors and were hesitant to answer outcome measures on drug use, fights, or risk behaviors honestly. Later, as trust was established, some youths were more likely to admit having these problems and needing help. Thus, the rates of drug use and delinquent behavior appeared to increase after the match had been made—an artifact we discovered after receiving feedback from the MISY programs. This trust dynamic questions the use of self-reports as true measures of behavioral change that might be brought about by mentoring and hence might affect future study designs. It underscores, however, the importance of the trust and emotional relationship when beginning to work with at-risk youths on risk behaviors and their awareness-ownership of them.

Challenges faced by MISY programs (that other mentoring programs also may face) when working with system-involved youth includes a very low literacy rate among many youths and families. This caused a wide range of difficulties from assessment challenges to program communication issues. Our evaluation depended somewhat on self-report survey measures that, though age appropriate for readers, were difficult for some of the population under study. Thus, we do not know the exact impact of short-term measures caused by literacy issues. Staff attempted to assist youth who struggled, but some youth hid their reading difficulties. Lower literacy rates are positively correlated with youth risk behaviors and recidivism, so this problem should be of concern to programs hoping to remediate risk. Lower family literacy makes communication between mentors and parents more difficult as well. Some MISY families did not use the Internet or e-mail, though most had cell phones. Transportation issues also were among the programmatic challenges of bringing the MISY youths together with their mentors.

Although the four programs had varied functional definitions of mentoring (ranging in model, size, age group, and instrumentality), all had some success in providing services to their system-involved youth. All four programs encountered some challenges because their populations were

somewhat different from the usual “low to moderate at-risk” population with which traditional mentoring programs often deal. Although all mentees participated voluntarily, the circumstances of the decision to have a mentor, for example as a “post release” transition aid back into the community, (The Aftercare Academy) does seem to affect the creation, mutual satisfaction, and consistency of some matches. Mentors also need considerable support in these conditions. The residential instability of many vulnerable families in this population was one such challenge. The foster-system-involved youths often are moved from one home or area to another or are returned to their families of origin. Documenting the effectiveness of programs on identified outcomes—risk and protective factors, substance use, or other outcomes—was difficult, with the exception of a modest but statistically significant decrease in reported juvenile justice system involvement between baseline and subsequent waves. Thus, attrition affected both the program size and the sample size of our study. This attrition and early termination were of concern both to the staff of these programs and to these evaluators because research suggests that most positive youth development and risk abatement outcomes of mentoring occur when relationships have a chance to develop over time. The need for having a mentor as a resource and the relationship as a protective factor is ongoing through the adolescent years for this population.

Lack of documented outcome data from programs should not be considered a programmatic failure. Personnel and mentors in each of the programs were passionate about serving system-involved youth. Many responded to the youths “as needed” outside of normal match meetings, which is often what teens need. Relationships with adolescents are often crisis driven, and their personal crises are risky times for other dysfunctional behaviors. In other words, their needs happen on their schedules (Saturday nights, etc.), not at adult convenience, but they value adults who are there when needed. Many program staff (and mentors) rose to these challenges. All programs reported some ongoing relationships beyond the time that the programs were studied. These ongoing relationships suggest that some mentors and mentees received the support they needed to move forward into a longer relationship that may bring about more positive outcomes.

In future studies, it is crucial to examine evaluation readiness, including data-collection options and funding infrastructure, to better facilitate collecting long-term outcome data from small, nonprofit, mentoring organizations like the four MISY projects. An examination of streamlined data-collection options and applications more amenable to longer-term effects may be designed with an enhanced possibility of success. Nonetheless, standards of scientific validity are difficult to establish without a comparison group, which is hard to establish in this type of evaluation research. Developing nationally normed comparison groups that would control for developmental and risk factors might be more practical than expecting each site to manage its own comparison population. The staff of these small nonprofit programs lacked waiting lists or other treatment or non-treatment groups that would have allowed us to form a viable comparison group. Program staff who are working with high-need youths often have difficulty with the concept of not taking all the youth with need into their programs if they have capacity.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS FROM THE MISY EVALUATION

Brief highlights of findings from our cross-site evaluation of the four MISY projects follow.

YOUTH AND MENTOR BACKGROUND

The youth studied in each program had demonstrated several risk factors in their environments, and many had shown risk behaviors. Largely, these youths lived with a single parent or had adjudication histories (California), were in foster homes (Oregon), or had a balance of the two conditions (Virginia). In addition, our process and demographic data suggested a common theme of poverty as more than 90 percent of participating MISY youths were eligible for a free or a reduced-price lunch, indicating low family income levels. We were unable to draw as many conclusions from the EMP (Illinois) evaluation because its staff could not provide us with demographic data. All programs also reported that many youth and families had low-literacy or achievement levels, or both.

The reported number of mentors recruited ranged from 2 (California) to 138 (Virginia). Combining the four sites there were 128 female mentors and 63 males mentors. Of the 191 mentors for whom ethnicity information was collected, 107 were Caucasian, 71 were African-American, and the rest were small percentages of Hispanic, Asian-American, and other racial/ethnic groups.

MENTORS AND SYSTEM-INVOLVED MENTEES BUILT STRONG AND REWARDING RELATIONSHIPS

A key evaluation activity to assess match strength was fielding Quality of Match Surveys with youth and the Mentor Match Survey with mentors. Despite the difficulty collecting complete evaluation data from every match, 116 matches across the four programs completed baseline strength of relationship measures in the third month of the match, and remained active enough to be assessed at 9 months. We fielded Quality of Match surveys with youth and Mentor Match Surveys with mentors. Our analysis of the Quality of Match and Mentor Match Surveys completed after being matched demonstrated that each of the MISY programs helped mentors and mentees build mutually satisfying relationships.

MENTOR STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIP

Mentor Match Surveys were collected at 3 and 9 months with mentors. This survey was similar to those used in other mentoring studies as discussed by Harris and Nakula (2003). MISY program mentors felt close to their mentees and perceived little distance 3 months after they were matched. For the mentors, these feelings of closeness were not found to increase in the 9-

month survey, but the closeness levels at 3 months were maintained. However, mentors who remained with the programs long enough to fill out the 9-month survey tended to rate the match as being stronger after 9 months, which indicates they felt they were being effective.

Mentors felt that the relationship focused on academic achievement, character development, and emotional sharing. In addition, mentors felt strongly that the MISY programs provided support for them as mentors. These patterns generally held from 9 to 15 months, but the trend was for slightly more perceived distance, slightly less reported focus on academic achievement and character development, and less program support as the time went on.

The mentors who stayed in the study (i.e., those who completed both the 3- and 9-month surveys) were more likely to score higher on “closeness” and academic achievement scales at baseline (3 months) than those who did not complete a 9-month survey. This result suggests the predictive importance of the relationship getting off on the right foot early in the match. It further suggests that there may be a “readiness factor” for the potential mentee that should be considered. Some system-involved youths did not have the social skills or future orientation needed to negotiate a new relationship with an adult who was interested in them. For some, this could be almost threatening. Some level of “orientation toward success,” social competence, or “need to please” may be needed as a prerequisite for a mentee to negotiate his or her side of a meaningful relationship with a mentor.

YOUTH STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIP

For youth, we collected Quality of Match Surveys at 3, 9, and 15 months. Three months after being matched, youth respondents reported high degrees of satisfaction with their mentoring relationship. Sixty percent of the youths felt they had a “close relationship” with their mentors. When asked to respond to the statement “My mentor cares about me,” 73 percent of youth across the four MISY projects chose “very true” after 3 months into the relationship. The highest percentage of youth responding with high satisfaction was from the Virginia (100 percent) and Oregon (81 percent) projects—the more traditional one-to-one programs. Further, the younger median ages of the mentees in this sample was one of the likely factors contributing to the youths’ expressions of greater perceived closeness. Responses to another individual question indicated that 71 percent of matched youth in the four MISY programs thought it was “pretty true” or “very true” that their mentors made them “feel special.”

Youth who stayed in the match longer were more engaged with their mentors. There was a statistically significant increase in the youths’ feelings of closeness with their mentors from between 3 to 9 months after the relationship began. The prevailing perception by youth in all four MISY programs was that relationships focused *on both fun and relationship development* and that this balance was important. Apparently, as the relationship developed, so did the mentee’s perception that the mentor was focusing on his or her goals. Thus, it apparently is possible to be both relationship-focused and instrumental in skills enhancement—in fact,

relationship development may be considered almost prerequisite to skill building and to long-term positive outcomes for youth.

Although the process by which youths were matched to mentors varied across programs, youths reported strong matches at 3 months and even stronger match satisfaction at 9 months for those who sustained their matches. This is a particularly impressive outcome for foster-care and other system-involved youth who often lack the social skills needed to maintain a relationship. It also suggests that the vulnerable period for matches may occur between these benchmark periods, underscoring the importance of program support for mentors in the first year.

Despite the challenges discussed, all four programs reported that some ongoing relationships lasted beyond the time that the programs were formally studied. These results show that, despite the challenges of implementing the cross-site evaluation, each of the four MISY programs successfully made and supported some effective mentoring relationships.

The most successful program studied implemented a camp experience for mentors and mentees where they spent a weekend together early in the program year. This gave the pairs an opportunity to get to know each other in a structured setting of activities, have fun and share meals, and to bond early in their relationship.

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Since the initiation of the MISY evaluation, the mentoring field has been focusing more on some of the additional discrete factors that contribute to stronger matches and hence better outcomes as profiled by Karcher and Nakkula (2010). These factors include influences such as match dosage (how often mentors and mentees see each other and for how long). Some other examples are early match formation dosage, the age of match for developmental matches, gender appropriateness, the balance of program focus (fun versus skill building), expanded mentor training/ support, the importance of greater youth determined instrumentality and mutual goal setting with older mentees, and the importance of primary relationship development before focusing on skills development for younger mentees. Involvement of parents also has become an increasing focus and needs to be carefully explored. All of these dynamics of mentor-match efficacy seemed to be at play with the system-involved mentee population we

studied as well. Many promising practices were in evidence from our qualitative observations and quantitative assessments of these four sites.

IMPLICATION ONE: RECRUITMENT OF MENTORS

Personal networking, the Internet, and program showcases have all been used to recruit mentors.

Although recruiting mentors is a difficult challenge for all mentoring programs, the most difficult target recruitment audience for this study appeared to be for African-American males to provide role models for African-American male youths. Several methods of recruitment were used by the MISY programs with varying success. The EMP's approach of personal networking, in which men shared their experiences with friends and professional colleagues and asked them to participate, was most successful at recruitment of African-American men. This is how Wertheimer, the first mentor, recruited his business colleagues to mentor by sharing his vision and satisfaction with mentoring. Mentor Portland, on the other hand, found the Internet the most fruitful outreach source, through which it attracted 71 percent of its mentors. Other programs used program showcases to explain their programs. Mass media not only was too expensive for the MISY programs, but it also does not permit the level of information that individuals need to commit to mentoring. Keeping mentors satisfied with their accomplishments through ongoing training and support and occasional recognition while encouraging them to share their experiences with peers will strengthen recruiting, as well as retention, as mentoring programs and matches mature.

A cost-benefit analysis of various recruitment methods would be beneficial to the field and would help the field develop best practices for recruiting mentors.

IMPLICATION TWO: DOSAGE

Early, intensive dosage including engagement such as retreat weekends, appears to be a best practice that can help ensure more pairings are sustainable and thereby improve longer-term outcomes.

MISY programs recognized that dosage is critically important with system-involved youth to build trust. Previous research has suggested there is a relationship between dosage (time mentors and mentees spend together) and match satisfaction and effectiveness. With the MISY population, this appeared to be particularly true. Because building trust is difficult and dependent on contact, standard mentoring models of 1 or 2 hours a week had to be supplemented with additional contacts between mentees and mentors. Mentor Portland emphasized that mentors and mentees spend substantial time together at the beginning of the match. Mentor Portland mentors and mentees participated in a retreat weekend at the beginning of each match. The retreat gave both mentors and mentees an opportunity to become acquainted with each other in a structured setting of activities, to have fun and share meals, and to bond early in their relationship. These retreats resulted in higher match satisfaction rates at months 3 and 9 and greater strength of match (as reported by both mentors and mentees) for both mentors and mentees both at the 3rd

month and 9th month. The other programs did not provide this intensive dosage at the beginning of the match, and none of them ever reached the level of satisfaction reached by Mentor Portland at months 3 and 9. Mentor Portland found that the weekend retreats accelerated the establishment of relationships within a structure of planned and parallel work and play that helped mentees differentiate their mentoring relationship from other adult relationships (teacher, probation officer) that may be more authoritarian in nature. The joint events help clarify the nature of the relationship for the youth and may have functioned also as experiential training for mentors, demonstrating the kind of “play, talk, learn” interactions and situations they should construct with their mentees going forward.

A factor in dosage with volunteer mentors is the issue of constancy and consistency. Business travel, school activities, family plans, and other conflicts can undermine regular match meetings and activities. Some MISY programs dealt with this by working in mentor pairs or having staff mentors who back up the mentor. Although this could not replace a meeting with the special one-to-one mentor and mentee, the MISY study observations found that using pairs of mentors helped keep mentees engaged in the match at the beginning of the program year, especially if there were physical group activities or joint community activities. With this support, some MISY youths began to change their views of adults as being caring resources, as the mentors were available when they needed them. The early intensive dosage that Mentor Portland ensured by its retreat weekend appears to be a best practice that can help more pairings be sustainable and thereby improve longer-term outcomes.

For further research and evaluation, “dosage” measures in terms of contact hours and patterns and constancy ratings, especially in the first 6 months of a match, should be studied. The number of hours of pairs training (early groups dosage) and an analysis of the discrete components of training content in skills that enhance mentors/staff understanding of youth also should be examined in more detail as potential best practices for mentoring programs that involve volunteers and paid staff. Studying the timing and the “as-needed” versus “in-case” nature of these supports are important. Given the difficulty in recruiting mentors, it would seem logical to provide support for and invest in current mentors for retention and fulfillment—this is a significant next step for researchers and the field.

IMPLICATION THREE: DEVELOPMENTAL AGE AND STAGE AT MATCH ONSET

It is unclear if there is a critical age for developing the kinds of mentoring relationships that endure long enough to (a) have a lasting influence, (b) yield positive outcomes, and (c) deter justice system involvement.

The most successful of the MISY programs in terms of mentor match quality and outcomes was Mentor Portland whose median match age of 11 years old was the youngest of the four sites with matches starting as early as 8 years old. Mentor Portland found that children were more eager to have a one-to-one mentor. Likewise, mentors preferred the younger mentees as well—perhaps

feeling their efforts would make more of a difference in the lives of children. Keller and Pryce (2010) described the mentoring relationship as “mutual but unequal,” having a vertical rather than horizontal power dynamic. Developmentally, it may be that children more readily accept another parent or teacher-like dynamic in their lives, whereas teens aged 13 and older, especially those without a strong parental support history, are more oriented to “mutual and equal relationships,” like voluntary peers. The Aftercare Academy had the oldest mean age of 16.4 and the most problems with youth not showing up or dropping out of the program, even though its goal was to ease their transition and success after their release from detention. Among the 83 matches made by Mentor Match Virginia, the median age of the youth sustaining the match decreased by almost 2 years of age during the study—suggesting a higher rate of attrition among older youth mentees.

Further research on age and developmental readiness is needed. Retrospective studies of groups of developmental mentees with favorable outcomes would be valuable to determine if there is a critical age for developing the kinds of mentoring relationships that endure long enough (a) to have a lasting influence, (b) to yield positive outcomes, and (c) to deter justice system involvement.

IMPLICATION FOUR: MENTORING MODEL AND STYLE

Program skills and focus must be in line with what youths see as their needs and goals (relevance) and a sense of collaboration must be present

Karcher and Nakkula (2010) described 12 types of mentoring ranging from “prescriptive” (highly structured and focused on the remediation of mentee deficits) to “laissez-faire” (nondirective, unstructured, and non-relational with no defined goal). They suggest the most promising styles seem to be in the middle of that continuum. These styles are (a) developmental, which is collaborative and relation oriented with a “we” authorship of focus, and (b) instrumental, which is collaborative but goal oriented. Preliminary research suggests that the instrumentality of programs (skills taught) may have more to do with keeping older teens engaged than a desire for a mentor relationship, but the *program skills and focus must be in line with what youths see as their needs and goals (relevance) and a sense of collaboration must be present*.

In three of the MISY projects, we saw a high level of instrumentality, some bordering on prescriptive in terms of program description. Teen mentees who remained at the highly structured Aftercare Academy (California) and EMP (Illinois) were quoted as doing so “to get a job” or “to learn how to start a business” or “to avoid trouble” though their mentor satisfaction scores were not as high as those in the more relationship-oriented programs. This may have been because their locus of control for the activity chosen was not as high because program focus was predetermined. Alternatively, perhaps relationships need to be developed with these youths

before they care about their own outcomes and hence program content. Some successful youth development programs with at-risk youth, such as Sasha Bruce Youth Works (2012), The Possibility Project (2012) and The Innovation Center (2003) have “youth-led” planning committees to help determine learning activities and promote pro-social youth actions in and for society. These programs have found youth participation in leadership helps youth have program ownership and connectedness, but these practices were not in evidence in the MISY programs under study.

For future research, it would be important to assess the efficacy of Karcher and Nakkula’s 12 “mentor types” or dimensions (focus of skills, joint decision making, or relationship focus) and their ability to deliver on outcomes at each developmental stage. Observational studies of older youth and mentor matches to rate their types and then study their intermediate and long-term outcomes would be helpful to determine the most successful interaction dynamics for working with older system-involved youth (who may begin as less emotionally engaged). This would be useful in determining how to optimize the training and utilization of mentors for system-involved youth.

IMPLICATION FIVE: MENTOR TRAINING

Program support of mentoring relationships and training helps matches form and endure.

MISY programs that provided ongoing mentor meetings retained more mentors and sustained a longer-than-average match duration. Across the four MISY programs, mentors rated the level of support from each of the MISY programs as “good” to “very good” with 20 percent variance depending on the program. Mentors from Mentor Portland reported the strongest satisfaction with program support, with 64 percent reporting that they were “very satisfied.” Mentor Portland provided twice the number of hours (16 hours) of initial training for mentors than did the other programs. This greater degree of training seemed to have had strong and significant associations with both mentor satisfaction and match duration. This training was supplemented with monthly or bimonthly mentor-only support sessions with case managers to share their experiences and to develop relationships with one another. Some programs have opportunities for mentors to meet and stay connected and to receive continued training; our experience with the four MISY programs suggests that training and program support appeared to sustain commitment and enhance match length.

One MISY program had a case manager who came in on a weekend to meet with a match pair having bonding issues. Karcher, Kuperminc, Portwood, Sipe, and Taylor (2006) notes that mentor training and support are important factors in mentor retention. This appears to be even more important with system-involved youth, given their extra challenges and the effect of those challenges on the match. National and State train-the-trainer mentoring resources and trainings in

Oregon, Virginia, and other States are available; these trainings could lengthen and strengthen current training programs and provide ongoing growth opportunities for mentors.

Future research and evaluation should involve a component analysis of mentor and pair trainings. Often the mentor trainings involved logistics but had low levels of adolescent development and tools to teach “as-needed” skills to youth (anger management, conflict resolution). An analysis of the delivery systems of training is also warranted. Is content (maybe delivered online, as needed) or process (mentor groups) the most effective or are both needed?

IMPLICATION SIX: MATCH DURATION

LONGER MATCHES REMAIN THE GOAL

Previous studies have pointed to the stronger results of matches that last longer than 9 months. (Karcher, 2008 ; Rhodes, 2005). Even the OJJDP definition of mentoring implies the concept of a long-term relationship. Only one program of the four MISY programs under study sustained a group of matches long enough to do a meaningful 15-month assessment. This was EMP of Chicago that was connected to making youth employable. The median match length of the combined MISY groups documented was slightly longer than 5 months. This average length was weighted most heavily by Mentor Match Virginia, which had the largest number of the matches. Its results, including the early closure of two outreach sites due to funding issues, lowered the total averages. Although these average durations of match were short (mostly less than 1 year), there were some good “match quality” outcomes (71 percent said their mentor made them feel special). However, there were no statistically significant changes in more permanent outcomes, such as self-esteem or school achievement. Given these outcomes and previous research on match duration, it may be that mature and experienced mentors need to be recruited who are not intimidated by the extra challenges of system-involved youth and understand the importance of remediating their experiences by building and sustaining relationships for longer periods for this population. Short match durations, less than 1 year, may not produce the desired long-term outcomes and, if terminated by the mentor, may even be another disappointment in the lives of youth with histories of unstable home situations or disrupted relationships. Mentoring 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.

Managing mentor expectations at recruitment and providing training and support for mentors for the inevitable challenges of creating a relationship with mentees who have not had strong histories with adults would help sustain these relationships past first conflicts. Although some programs may have difficulty in recruiting mentors for longer than 1 year, it would be advisable to include the research and positive implications of a longer relationship in their mentor trainings so that the mentor goes into the relationship with the intention of forming a long-term

connection. Although these youths may not “expect” longer relationships, they deserve to experience that continuity that has been correlated with positive youth outcomes (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma Jr., 2006).

Our understanding of the factors that contribute to long-term matches might be uncovered by interviewing mentors and mentees of relationships that have lasted 3 years or longer about the “arc” of their relationships, their relationship crises and how they handled them, key “turning points” and resources, and other factors that supported the match. Follow-up interviews about factors leading to failed relationships also seem to be missing from the literature.

IMPLICATION SEVEN: PARENT INVOLVEMENT

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IS CHALLENGING BUT WORTHWHILE

None of the MISY programs had a structured parental component to its intervention. However, Mentor Portland made it a habit for caseworkers to conduct home visits at recruitment and during the initiation of the match to ensure the parent, guardian, or foster parent was supportive of the match and understood the program expectations and to ensure that the mentee knew what to expect. This was yet another component to Mentor Portland’s high satisfaction rates. This action helped reduce the parental interference and sabotage that was encountered by other MISY programs. In some programs, some mentors reported they worked hard to communicate with parents but met with frustrations. Though parents of high-risk and system-involved youth may seem less than desirably involved at times, it does not mean they are open to being replaced by another adult who may be more “popular” with their child. This dynamic may be particularly true with girls and their mothers and be complicated by different cultural roles for girls in society. For example, a young professional female mentor may have a different definition of success (college and career) than a mentee’s mother who just wants her to make a successful marriage match and have children. It would be beneficial for programs to invite parents to group events regularly so that mentors and parents have an opportunity to interact in a structured setting, learn from each other, and develop a communication process. This communication also can help prevent a youth from manipulating either the mentor or the parent/guardian by using the other as a power card.

IMPLICATION EIGHT: ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS AND RESOURCES

It takes much more time, preparation, experience, and endurance than one might think to recruit, match, train, and support mentors and youth.

Mentoring can seem like a relatively simple construct—match a caring adult with a young person who can learn from them. Promoting mentoring seems like something that any nonprofit organization that serves youth might reasonably take on to promote better youth outcomes. In reality, as with most effective social programs, it takes much more time, preparation, experience,

and endurance than one might think to recruit, match, train, and support mentors and youth. For system-involved youth, the challenge includes all additional uncertainties and deficits of that population. For small, nonprofit organizations, funding and staffing also are uncertain.

Implementing a strict quasi-experimental study with system-involved youth and small nonprofit organizations is extremely challenging without support, such as an onsite evaluator. Empirical studies of mentoring and/or programs serving system-involved youth are best studied with well-established and resourced organizations with trained onsite evaluation staff members who clearly understand the relationship of evaluation to sustainability. Direct service staff and evaluation/data-management staff should be different individuals so that the needs of youth and the needs of the study are distinct accountabilities.

Cost-benefit analysis of established mentoring organizations, as well as other organizations with mentoring “add-ons” and other youth programs addressing the same populations, should be considered. It is important for organizations that undertake the development of new mentoring programs to have strong organizational readiness and an awareness of the costs (such as staff and training needs and their associated costs). This knowledge will help organizations make better decisions about their ability to use mentoring to improve their youth outcomes, as compared with other approaches they may be using.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As noted, a key focus of our evaluation was on assessing the strength of relationships between youths and mentors. In the *Quality of Match Survey* after 3 months of being matched, youth respondents reported high degrees of satisfaction with their mentoring relationship. Sixty percent of the youths felt they had a “close relationship” and perceived that the mentoring relationship focused both on relationship development and on having fun. The mentoring relationship is partially defined by OJJDP as exposing youth to a “structured and trusting relationship.” Most youths who responded to the *Quality of Match Survey* suggested that, for these MISY programs, this goal was successfully met for those who remained in the program. After being in a match for 3 to 9 months, youths also perceived intimacy with their mentors as having increased over time.

Results of the quality of match surveys completed by mentors after being matched for 3 months indicated that approximately 41 percent of mentors felt that they “very often” or “always” had a strong bond with their mentees. About the same proportion (41 percent) of the mentors felt that they “very often” or “always” were making a difference in their mentees’ lives. Mentors who stayed in the study (i.e., those who completed both the 3- and the 9-month surveys) were more likely to score higher on the *Closeness* and *Academic Achievement Scales* at baseline than those who did not complete a 9-month survey.

Although our findings related to the strength of the matches made by MISY programs are useful and suggestive of the success that the MISY programs had, we did not find the evidence related to long-term youth outcomes—due primarily to challenges we encountered. We acknowledge that in field research of this kind, there are always unique challenges. Mentoring clearly can benefit many youths and mentors in a variety of programs—but those effects are not always measurable, no matter how strong the program may be. As with any personal relationship, there are hits and misses, and short-term and long-term connections with disappointments and life-changing outcomes. Several anecdotal reports suggested it could be many years before the real outcomes of these efforts manifest themselves in the youth they touched. The long-term influence on the youths’ lives and how they may relate to youth when they are adults is a topic for further study through structured interviews and record examinations and, where feasible, longitudinal studies.

In this study, as in others, we observed that:

- recruiting mentors was a challenge;
- creating lasting matches was a subjective art;
- dosage (when and how much exposure to the mentor) is important;
- mentors need more training and support than they typically get,
- younger mentees are more readily affected by mentoring because they often are more invested and easier to create a relationship with;
- focus of the relationship and relational style matters; and
- a good start predicts a better outcome.

Some organizations appear to have a better grasp on the “key deliverables” even though their curriculum may not be well defined on paper.

So we return to the question: “What is mentoring”? In this study and across the literature, it is many things to many people, with divergent definitions in different programs. It therefore needs to be defined as several different interventions and studied as such. Is it transformational for system involved youth? For a few, definitely yes! For many, maybe—we don’t know yet. For others, unfortunately no. Factors for keeping partners involved and increasing the yeses, as well as sustaining these important efforts, becomes a worthwhile subject of research. What is apparent is that youth need to “feel special” to someone and then to “feel capable” to engage positively with their communities. Other programs for at-risk youth, including some of the strong youth-led programs organized by commitment youth development professionals engender this same sense of caring and deserve support and study as well. There are probably many ways to accomplish that end. For mentoring organizations, maximizing partnerships, improving the sharing of

materials, using volunteers and graduate students in roles beyond mentoring to strengthen organizations, and collecting data are indicated. For the “hard to transport,” maximizing the use of the online environment can be explored fruitfully.

Controlling for all the processes and influences at work in a developing young person is ultra-complex. Studies, such as cost-benefit analysis of mentoring and other related approaches, can sometimes help organizations assess their real costs, build capacity and find protocols, and establish processes and resources to make their programs more cost-effective while increasing benefits. We hope that our challenges and lessons learned from the evaluation of the MISY projects can be used to inform and improve future studies.

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