

# NATURALLY-OCCURRING MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS & CRIMINAL JUSTICE OUTCOMES:

## A PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION USING ADD HEALTH PUBLIC USE DATA

Kelly Stewart, PhD

David DuBois, PhD

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### BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

Mentoring has long been considered an important intervention strategy for reducing youth contact with the criminal justice system, yet research findings show that the estimated effect of mentoring as provided through formal programs on criminal justice outcomes is often modest and not consistent across studies. Naturally-occurring mentors in youths' lives may play a particularly important role in preventing criminal justice system engagement through building relationships with youth before they experience contact with the justice system. Studying naturally-occurring mentoring relationships also may help point to specific behaviors and processes that are important for promoting desired youth outcomes, thus providing avenues to explore for strengthening of formal mentoring programs.<sup>1</sup>

This report uses data from the public use data set of the [National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health \(Add Health\)](#) to investigate the relationship between youth reports of having a mentor and subsequent criminal justice-related outcomes. The dataset consists of a nationally representative sample of adolescents who were in grades 7 through 12 when beginning participation in the study during the 1994-1995 school year. Youth reports of having a mentor and juvenile arrests were collected at Wave III in 2000 when study participants were between the ages of 17 and 26. Criminal justice-related outcomes included in this report were collected at Wave IV in 2008 when participants were between the ages of 25 and 34; these outcomes included victimization as well as mental health experiences that have been associated with victimization. All analyses are limited to the public use portion of the dataset ( $N = 4,177$ ). The report concludes with a brief overview of how the findings can inform future directions in the youth mentoring field. It should be kept in mind that all data are based on the self-reports of youth and thus should be interpreted

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<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, S., Karcher, M. J., Stewart, K., & DuBois, D. L. (2020). *Mentoring for preventing and reducing delinquent behavior among youth*. National Mentoring Resource Center Research Review. Accessible at: <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/mentoring-preventing-and-reducing-delinquent-behavior-among-youth>

accordingly, although for sake of ease of presentation this qualifier is not included consistently throughout this brief.

## MENTORING

Mentoring was assessed with the item *“Other than your parents or step-parents, has an adult made an important positive difference in your life at any time since you were 14 years old?”* Overall, 77.7% of youth sampled ( $n = 3,241$ ) reported having a mentor. Respondents reported mentors who were related to them in a variety of ways, including (listed in order of frequency):

- Family members other their parents (34.4%), including siblings (13.4%), grandparents (10.9%), aunts (6%) and uncles (4.1%).
- Teachers/guidance counselors (19.9%)
- Friends (17.4%)
- Religious leaders (4.2%)
- Coaches/athletic directors (4%)
- A friend’s parent (3.9%)
- Coworker (3.5%)
- Employers (3.5%)
- “Others” (3.3%)
  - Spouses/partners (3.2%)
  - Neighbors (1%)
  - A doctor/therapist/social worker (.4%).

Respondents were asked to indicate *“how close do you feel to [mentor] these days?”* on a 5-point scale ranging from not close at all to very close, and yes or no, *“is [mentor] still important to you?”* Of those reporting a mentor, most (79.9%) reported they still felt somewhat to very close to their mentor and 89.1% reported that they still considered them important, but there was a good deal of variation in how often they saw one another:

- not at all (10.6%)
- once a year or less (16.1%)
- once a month to every few months (27.7%)
- one to five times a week (24.1%)
- almost every day (16.2%).

Respondents got to know their mentors through family (14.4%), a friend (13.6%), school (41.5%), work (16.3%), or by other means (14.2%). Participants in the sample were roughly half male (44.6%) and half female (55.4%), with female respondents somewhat more likely to report a mentor (79.7%) compared to males (75.4%).\*\*\*

\*indicates a statistically significant differences ( $p < .1$ ) that has a less than 10% likelihood of being due to chance factor;

\*\* indicates a statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) that has a less than 5% likelihood of being due to chance factor;

## ARRESTS

Participants in the sample reported on their arrest histories at both Wave III and the Wave IV follow up. Of the participants in the sample:

- 4.5% ( $n = 189$ ) had been arrested as a juvenile at Wave III
- 5.1% ( $n = 213$ ) had been arrested as a juvenile at Wave IV
- 27.2% ( $n = 1,138$ ) had one or more arrests at Wave IV\* and
- 13% ( $n = 542$ ) had two or more arrests at Wave IV.†

The data were analyzed for basic associations between reporting a mentor and these outcomes. The analysis revealed that the same proportion of mentored and non-mentored youth reported a juvenile arrest (4.5%) at Wave III. In the Wave IV follow-up eight years later, however, mentored participants differed from non-mentored participants in that they were:

- 1.9 percentage points (PP)\*\* less likely to have been arrested as a juvenile (4.6% vs. 6.5%)
- 3.2 PP\* less likely to have one or more arrests (26.5% vs. 29.7%)
- 4.7 PP\*\* less likely to have two or more arrests (13% versus 17.7%)

### **Gender Differences**

A greater proportion of male respondents (41.6%) reported having one or more arrests compared to female respondents (15.8%).\*\*\* Although samples subset by respondent gender were not large enough to capture clear statistically significant relationships between mentoring and arrests, trends in the data suggest possibly important differences for female versus male respondents.

For females, having a mentor showed a trend of association with reduced likelihood of having one or more arrests, but not with having two or more arrests. Specifically, female respondents with a mentor were:

- 2.3 PP less likely to have one or more arrests compared to female respondents without a mentor (15.4% vs. 17.7%)
- Essentially equally likely to have had two or more arrests compared to female respondents without a mentor (5.3% vs. 5.9%)

For male respondents, a contrasting pattern was evident in which having a mentor was not associated with reduced likelihood of having one or more arrests but did show a trend of association with less likelihood of two or more

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\*\*\* indicates a statistically significant differences ( $p < .01$ ) that has a less than 1% likelihood of being due to chance factor

\* Includes both juvenile and adult arrests

arrests and thus further entry into the justice system. Specifically, male respondents with a mentor were:

- Essentially equally likely to have had one or more arrests compared to male respondents without a mentor (41.3% vs. 42.1%)
- 2.7 PP Less likely to have had two or more arrests compared to male respondents without a mentor (23.1% vs. 25.8%)

### **Mentor Importance and Relationship Closeness**

It is also important to consider variation in the reported qualities of mentoring relationships that may have implications for criminal justice outcomes. Respondents were asked at Wave III to respond yes or no, “*is [mentor] still important to you?*”, and to respond “*how close do you feel to [mentor] these days?*” on a 5-point scale ranging from not close at all to very close. Among those reporting a mentor, reporting feeling at least somewhat close to the mentor was associated with a lower likelihood of later arrest.

- Respondents who reported that their mentor was still at least somewhat close with them had a 5.3 PP\*\*\* lower likelihood of having one or more arrests compared to those who reported that they no longer felt close to their mentor or only a little close (25.6% vs. 30.9%)
- The likelihood of having one or more arrests for respondents with a mentor who was no longer or only a little close were indistinguishable from those who reported no mentor at all

Similarly, participants who reported that their mentor was still important were 2.5 PP\*\* less likely to have one or more arrests compared to those whose mentor was not still important (6.4% vs. 8.9%). While the enduring quality of these relationships shows evidence of potentially being impactful, the age at which the mentor originally became important to the respondent was not associated with having one or more arrests.

### **Gender Differences in Association of Mentoring Relationship Quality with Arrests**

Next, gender differences in mentor closeness and importance were analyzed to investigate whether this might further explain differences in the association between mentoring and arrest rates. Findings indicated that females were 3.4 PP\*\*\* more likely than males to report being close to their mentor (91.2% vs. 87.8%) and 3.9 PP\*\*\* more likely to report their mentor was still important (94.6% vs. 90.7%).

Interestingly, moderate to high closeness with one's mentor was associated with less system involvement only for females. Closeness with their mentor was associated with:

- 6.1 PP\*\*\* lower likelihood of having any arrest for females (14.4% vs. 20.5%)
- Not significantly associated with likelihood off having any arrest for males (41.2% vs. 42.3%)

### **Past Year Illegal and Other Problem Behaviors**

For the most part, reporting a mentor was not associated with Wave IV reports of having engaged in various illegal or otherwise risky behaviors in the past year, including legal problems from alcohol or marijuana, abusing prescriptions drugs, selling drugs, buying or holding stolen property, hurting someone bad enough they needed treatment from a doctor or nurse, or pulling a gun on someone. However, mentored participants were

- 2.1 PP\*\* less likely to have gotten in a physical fight in the past year (3% vs 5.1%) and
- 1 PP\*\* less likely to have shot or stabbed someone in the past year (.9% vs. 1.9%).

Overall, 6.1% of the sample reported having been expelled. Respondents who reported having a mentor were

- 3.2 PP\*\*\* less likely to report having been expelled compared to those who did not have a mentor (7.1% vs. 10.3%).

### **Victimization**

Finally, data were analyzed to see if having a mentor was associated with victimization. Having a mentor was not associated with reports at Wave IV of having been beaten up, slapped, jumped, hit, kicked, shot, or stabbed in the past year. Having a mentor was, however, associated with significantly lower likelihood of having a knife or gun pulled on the respondent (6.1% vs. 8.1%).\*\*

Having a mentor was unfortunately associated with certain types of sexual victimization. Specifically, although mentored respondents did not report higher rates of sexual assault from their partners or their parents/caregivers, for other types of sexual victimization they were:

- 3.6%\*\*\* more likely to report a sexual assault using non-physical force (for instance, through verbal pressure or by being given drugs or alcohol (13.3% vs. 9.7%)
- 3.3%\*\*\* more likely to report a sexual assault through physical force (9% vs. 5.7%)

## Mental Health Problems

Next, data were analyzed to look for potential associations of mentoring with mental health outcomes. A small proportion of respondents reported mentor health problems. This included or having spent time in a mental health facility (2%) at Wave III, as well as past year suicidal ideation (6.3%) at Wave IV. Having a mentor did not exhibit an association with reports of suicidal ideation.

## Concluding Observations and Recommendations

The findings presented here provide support for mentoring as an effective tool for reducing the entry of young adults into the criminal justice system. Interestingly, the age at which the mentor became important was not associated with later arrest as an adult. This suggests that pre-adolescence and adolescence may be an important time for youth to form mentoring relationships with adults if they don't already exist. While it may be ideal for youth to have supportive adults in their life starting at an early age, relationships with adults that form in the teen years may have the potential to be just as effective at preventing negative outcomes by providing support for youth in the midst of an important developmental period.

Findings also support the notion that not all mentors are necessarily positive influences and that not all mentoring relationships reduce delinquency. There are a number of potential reasons that having a mentor did not relate to lower likelihood of arrest for males in this sample. Other research on the full Add Health sample found that males tended to receive advice and guidance from their mentor, whereas females were more likely to seek emotional support and say their mentor was "like a parent."<sup>2</sup> It is possible males tended to seek the advice of their mentors related to delinquent behavior after it became a problem in their lives. Further, it is always a possibility that mentors themselves in at least some instances could be engaging in negative behavior that influences the mentee.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Kelley, M. S., & Lee, M. J. (2018). When natural mentors matter: Unraveling the relationship with delinquency. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 91(2018), 319-328. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.06.002>

<sup>3</sup> Van Dam, L., Smit, D., Wildschut, B., Branje, S. J. T., Rhodes, J. E., Assink, M., & Stams, G. J. J. (2018). Does natural mentoring matter? A multilevel meta-analysis on the association between natural mentoring and youth outcomes. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 62(1-2), 203-220. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12248>

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, L., & Felson, M. (1979). Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activity approach. *American Sociological Review*, 44(4), 588-608. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2094589>

A particularly surprising finding here was the association between having a mentor and experiences of sexual assault. One possible explanation supported by routine activities theory <sup>4</sup> is that the respondents who reported a mentor were more socially connected in general, and thus more likely to be exposed to people or situations that might cause them harm. Whether or not the mentors themselves are putting the youth at risk and how requires future research.

Findings suggest the following potentially useful directions for further advancement of mentoring programs as an intervention strategy for youth.

### **1. Encourage Investment in Long Term Follow-Up Evaluations**

The findings presented here suggest that short term follow ups may fail to capture the true effects of mentoring. Mentoring program grantees should be encouraged to invest in long-term follow-ups to capture potential effects on criminal justice outcomes that may not appear until years following the intervention. This may be especially relevant for criminal justice outcomes for youth that occur at a relatively low base rate. As respondents get older and accumulate life experiences, they are more likely to have engaged in behaviors and had experiences, such as having been arrested, that evaluation measures are trying to capture.

### **2. Support Programs in Creating Sustainable Mentoring Relationships**

Having a mentor with whom young persons sustain meaningful connections as they transition into later adolescence and early adulthood appears to have important implications for later outcomes. This is especially relevant given the challenges many mentoring programs are currently facing with COVID-19. Providing resources and technical assistance to help mentors stay close to their mentees while maintaining safe social distancing should be prioritized as should providing resources and recommendations for promoting sustained and healthy relationships following program closure in general.

### **3. Provide Program Support for Mentee Safety**

The factors contributing to the association between reporting having a mentor and report of sexual abuse are unclear. It is a reminder, however, of the importance of ensuring that mentoring programs are equipped with adequate resources and technical assistance not only to ensure the recruitment, screening, and training of quality mentors, but also to protecting mentees from sexual victimization from any part of their lives.

#### **4. Expand Evaluation Measures**

In addition to planning for follow-up assessments, evaluations can expand their focus beyond arrest to disciplinary actions at school, such as expulsions, as well as risky behaviors that may not have led to arrest, such as getting into fights and using weapons. Evaluations also should include specific measures and items to capture the quality and longevity of mentoring relationships as well as potentially gender-based differences in how mentor-mentee pairs spend their time together.

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