

The Effects of Law-Enforcement Mentoring on Youth: A Scoping Review

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Introduction

This brief scoping review provides an overview of current research findings relating to law enforcement mentoring of youth. While not a systematic review of all available research, the findings present the current landscape of the types of programs that have been studied, the goals of such programs, and the evidence of their effectiveness for achieving intended outcomes. The review begins with a brief history and theoretical justification for engaging law enforcement (e.g., police) as mentors. Next, an overview of the review scope and literature search strategy is provided, along with a summary of findings of identified studies and consideration of their limitations. The final sections provide conclusions as well as recommendations for practice and research.

Background

There are two major ways in which police and other law-enforcement personnel have been engaged in mentoring roles for youth. First, community-based mentoring programs provide opportunities for law enforcement and youth to interact with one another in informal community settings. Second, school-based mentoring brings youth into contact with law enforcement during school hours.

Community-Based Law Enforcement Mentoring

The existence of police mentoring in recreational settings for hard to reach, often urban youth, can be traced back over a century in the United States as a means of improving youths' behaviors and values through participation in sports, games, and fun leisure activities while also providing space for police to build relationships with community members in an informal setting.¹ In later years, the role of police in recreational programs has also served a more practical community need by providing needed staff for recreational centers. While a lack of recreational services in underserved areas is often cited anecdotally as a catalyst of youth crime, the impact of recreational law enforcement mentoring programs like the Police Athletic League (PAL) on youth behaviors has not been assessed in formal research.^{1,2} Survey and qualitative data does however suggest that youth enjoy such programs and that they help youth foster feelings of connection with their community.^{3,4} Police-mentoring in community-based settings also

¹ Bustad, J. J., & Andrews, D. L. (2017). Policing the void: Recreation, social inclusion and the Baltimore Police Athletic League. *Social Inclusion* 5(2), 241 -249

² Rabois, D., & Haaga, D. A. (2002). Facilitating police–minority youth attitude change: The effects of cooperation within a competitive context and exposure to typical exemplars. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(2), 189-195.

³ Bean, C. N., & Forneris, T. (2014). Participants' experiences of a community-based sport program: A vehicle to positive youth development. *Ágora para la Educación Física y el Deporte*, 16(1), 59-75.

⁴ Johns, A., Grossman, M., & McDonald, K. (2014). " More Than a Game": the impact of sport-based youth mentoring schemes on developing resilience toward violent extremism. *Social Inclusion*, 2(2), 57-70.

occurs outside of recreational settings. Law Enforcement can act as mentors in traditional one-to-one mentoring programs where activities are largely driven by youth needs and the youth and mentor's interests.⁵ Some programs also allow youth to engage in law enforcement activities such as riding along on police patrols or helping with community events.⁶ These programs demonstrate how partnerships between police departments and other community organizations can be used to meet community needs across a broad range of settings.

School-Based Police-Mentoring

Law enforcement personnel also have been used in mentor roles in school settings. This has involved police-led education-based drug and gang prevention programs like Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E) and Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.), as well as full-time school police officers, typically meant to provide support and mentoring to students while also maintaining school security.^{7,8} The presence of law enforcement officers in schools has increased drastically over the past 40 years, with roughly half of schools now employing at least one sworn law enforcement officer.⁹ Usually, School Resource Officers (SROs) are assigned to schools from local police districts or sheriff offices, though many schools rely on police from independent school district police departments who likely operate under different expectations and norms compared to SROs.⁸

While the influence of school police on crime has been extensively researched, the evidence has been mixed.¹⁰ This is likely driven by three factors. First, little is found in the literature about what school police officers do when they engage in their roles, which are shaped by unique factors such as the needs of their school and the culture of their police department. Second, most SROs do not receive training on youth development, and evidence suggests they receive little to no training in mentoring or support as a mentor, despite the fact that SROs report that mentoring is a significant expectation of their job and a significant source of job satisfaction.¹⁰ Finally, law enforcement duties can often contradict or undermine an officer's ability to mentor when they're expected to respond punitively to youth who turn to them for help.^{10,8} For these reasons and others, the presence of police in schools has been a highly debated issue in recent years, leading some schools and school districts to actively seeking out alternative models of safety. While proponents feel that police are necessary to maintain safe learning environments, critics argue that their role has led to an increase in arrests for developmentally typically behavior, especially for youth of color and youth with disabilities.⁸

Law Enforcement Mentoring Outcomes

Community oriented policing posits that crime can be prevented by emphasizing collaboration with community members and supporting local organizations, as opposed to typical police routine patrols

⁵ Chan, C. C., & Ho, W. C. (2006). Intensive community mentoring scheme in Hong Kong: Nurturing police-youth intergenerational relationships. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 4(2), 101-106.

⁶ Pepper, M., & Silvestri, M. (2017). 'It's like another family innit': Building police-youth relations through the Metropolitan Police Service Volunteer Police Cadet Programme. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 11(1), 1-13.

⁷ O'Leary, B. (2019). A Step Towards Stronger Police-Youth Relationships: Examining How Youth and Police View the Role of Police in Communities. *Community Engagement Student Work*. 33.

⁸ Ghavami, N., Thornton, B. E., & Graham, S. (2021). School police officers' roles: The influence of social, developmental and historical contexts. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 72, 101724.

⁹ National Center for Education Statistics (2017). *Percentage of public schools with security staff present at least once a week: 2005-06 through 2015-16*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_233.70.asp.

¹⁰ Javdani, S. (2019). Policing education: An empirical review of the challenges and impact of the work of school police officers. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 63(3-4), 253-269.

and rapid-response to crime.¹¹ Under a community policing framework, police get to know the needs of the community through both organized efforts and informal contact with community members. Young people, however, are much less likely than adults either to be involved in community policing efforts or to have informal contact with police. One survey of police officers found that officers tend to know the names of local business owners, but they infrequently interact with young people.¹² This is especially problematic considering that youth are also more likely to be stopped by the police and are more likely to have negative attitudes towards the police compared to adults.^{12,13} Mentoring programs in communities that involve law enforcement may serve an important role in reducing this social distance by providing space for youth and police to interact informally. Furthermore, a well-designed police mentoring program that incorporates elements of Intergroup Contact Theory¹⁴ could help to reduce stereotypes on both sides and facilitate a mutual understanding and respect.¹⁵ Such a program would incorporate police and youth working together as equal partners towards a common goal under the support of a greater authority. For example, in The Baltimore Outward Bound Police Insight Program, law enforcement and youth work to complete physical challenges posed by a facilitator on a climbing wall and ropes course.¹⁶ In other programs, youth and their mentors set community service related goals, such as holding fundraising drives, or hosting community clean ups.^{19,21}

A common goal of law enforcement mentoring programs is to improve youth perceptions of the police and attitudes towards the police. One outcome often targeted is procedural justice, which refers to beliefs that the procedures used within police organizations and those used by police themselves in their interactions with the public are justified and fair.¹⁷ More favorable ratings of procedural justice have been associated with outcomes such as greater trust in and satisfaction with police and higher ratings of police legitimacy, meaning belief that the police themselves are fair, just, and equitable.¹⁸ Under a procedural justice framework, a person's attitudes toward the police are formed through personal and vicarious interactions with police and the criminal justice system.^{7Error! Bookmark not defined.,17} Research suggests that attitudes about police legitimacy are further related to public participation in a number of important justice-related outcomes, including breaking the law, reporting crime, and cooperating with investigations.¹⁹

The age that youth attitudes towards police are still malleable is up for debate.¹⁹ Most police mentoring programs target teens, but targeting younger youth who are less likely to have already experienced negative interactions with the police may be more effective in determining young people's attitudes towards law enforcement. Moreover, young people have been increasingly exposed to instances of

¹¹ Anderson, S. A., Sabatelli, R. M., & Trachtenberg, J. (2007). Community police and youth programs as a context for positive youth development. *Police Quarterly*, 10(1), 23-40.

¹² Forman Jr, J. (2004). Community policing and youth as assets. *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 95(1), 1-48.

¹³ Fine, A. D., Padilla, K. E., & Tom, K. E. (2020). Police legitimacy: Identifying developmental trends and whether youths' perceptions can be changed. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 1-21.

¹⁴ Pettigrew, T. F. (1998). Intergroup Contact Theory. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 49(1), 65-85.

¹⁵ Rabois, D., & Haaga, D. A. (2002). Facilitating police-minority youth attitude change: The effects of cooperation within a competitive context and exposure to typical exemplars. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(2), 189-195.

¹⁶ Broadus, E. T., Scott, K. E., Gonsalves, L. M., Rhodes, E. L., Donovan, S. E., & Winch, P. J. (2013). Building connections between officers and Baltimore city youth: Key components of a police-youth teambuilding program. *Journal of Juvenile Justice*, 3(1), 48-56.

¹⁷ Hinds, L. (2009). Youth, police legitimacy and informal contact. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 24(1), 10-21.

¹⁸ Donner, C., Maskaly, J., Fridell, L., & Jennings, W. G. (2015). Policing and procedural justice: A state-of-the-art review. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*. 38(1), 153-172.

¹⁹ Fine, A. D., Padilla, K. E., & Tapp, J. (2019). Can youths' perceptions of the police be improved? Results of a school-based field evaluation in three jurisdictions. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 25(4), 303.

police violence in the media and conflicting messages about the police from adults, their peers, and social media. The full impact of these events on youth attitudes towards police remains to be seen; however, youth attitudes towards the police appear to be at an all-time low.^{12,19,20}

In addition to shaping youth attitudes, police mentoring programs may also be effective in fostering more informed and favorable attitudes towards youth among law enforcement. The way police treat young people plays an important role in shaping that youth's attitudes towards them.⁷ One field study indicated that police act disrespectful in about one tenth of their interactions with suspects and that they are more likely to act disrespectful towards youth and people from disadvantaged neighborhoods.¹¹ Acting as a mentor may help improve police officers understanding of the issues youth face and help them become more comfortable speaking and working with young people.¹²

Methods and Scope of this Review

The focus of this scoping review is on research conducted on programs and other intentional strategies to engage law enforcement professionals in mentoring roles with young persons, guided by the definition of mentoring provided by the [National Mentoring Resource Center](#). Programs were considered in scope if law enforcement professionals were directly involved in mentoring of youth, with law enforcement including police and those in similar roles (e.g., sheriff's deputies) as well as SROs, but not those working within the court system (attorneys, judges), juvenile justice (e.g., detention center staff), or probation and parole officers. Studies could report either quantitative or qualitative findings. Studies that focused on parent or school administrator outcomes were excluded. To further limit the scope of the review, studies on SROs were only included only if they explicitly referred to the SROs role as a mentor.

Keywords were used to search PsycInfo, ScienceDirect, EBSCO, Google Scholar, and Google. Abstracts were reviewed for relevance to law enforcement mentoring, with full-text review of those judged to be relevant to determine whether they fit within the scope of the review. Additional studies were identified through citations in the studies found through the literature search. A total of 4,286 studies were screened, and 28 were selected for full review. A summary of the mentoring programs identified in the review is displayed in Table 1.

Review of Research

Community-Based Police-Mentoring Programs

Almost half of the evaluations identified in this review took place in community settings. Most of these programs brought together youth and police for recreational group activities. These programs varied in length, intensity, and content, but they all served teenage or high-school age youth. This section will describe findings from the recreational law-enforcement mentoring program evaluations, followed by findings from programs that did not have a significant focus on recreational activities.

Recreational Police Mentoring

Youth Attitudes Towards the Police

While the goals of the identified programs were multifaceted, most evaluations focused on the impact of youth attitudes towards the police. Measures of attitude varied across studies but generally asked

²⁰ Turner, E. O., & Beneke, A. J. (2020). 'Softening' school resource officers: The extension of police presence in schools in an era of Black Lives Matter, school shootings, and rising inequality. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 23(2), 221-240.

whether youth trusted the police, liked them, and thought they were doing a good job. The overall evidence was mixed, with two evaluations finding an improvement in youth attitudes towards police from pre-test to post-test. The first was an evaluation of the Police and Youth Interactions Programs, a set of small-group mentoring programs lasting between two and six months. In these programs, police officers and teens spent time together doing mutually agreed upon recreational activities, like bowling or doing a ropes course, as well as working on a community service project.²¹ The second was the Youth-Police Initiative, an intensive two-week skill-building program for teens who had to report to mandatory reporting centers for non-violent offences. Youth were joined by police in the second week, and they had facilitated discussions in which both the youth and police were able to share personal stories and ask tough questions. The program ended with a celebratory dinner.²²

Evaluations of several other recreational police mentoring programs did not find improved attitudes towards the police from pre-test to post-test on survey measures. These programs differed from the two programs described above in several ways. Two were community drop-ins, in which not all youth had consistent exposure to a police mentor and police and youth did not have an opportunity to work towards a common goal together over time.^{17,23} There is also some indication in one of the evaluations that the lack of attitude change was partly driven by youth having positive attitudes towards police to begin with.²³ Another program, a Police Athletics League (PAL) basketball tournament targeting urban minority youth, did in fact allow teens and police the chance to get to know one another while working together towards a mutual goal over a 6-week period. Although youths' attitude towards their police teammates improved, their attitudes towards police in general did not.² This could have been a result of the program being purely recreational in nature, without structured time for discussions, or it's possible the goal worked towards (winning the tournament) was too low-stakes. It's also possible that because most participating officers were non-white, like the youth, they did not view them as representative of a typical police officer.

Findings from a qualitative study of the Baltimore Outward Bound Police Program further illustrate the pattern of mixed results in recreation-focused programs.¹⁶ This single-day program brought police officers together with youth for five to six hours in a wooded park to do fun activities like hiking, playing games, and a ropes course. The program was intentionally designed to incorporate each of the requirements of Intergroup Contact Theory.¹⁴ Program observation and interviews indicated that the activities in the morning led to casual conversations between youth and police over lunch, which in turn led to more serious conversations about police-youth relations as the day progressed. Interviews with youth revealed that although most knew a police officer they liked prior to the program, often at school, a vast majority viewed police as a whole as mean and uncaring. Following the program, students reported liking the participating officers, despite initial skepticism. Although some students expressed that the program didn't change their views of officers overall, many reported that the program humanized the officers involved and challenged their pre-existing assumptions.

²¹ Goodrich, S. A., Anderson, S. A., & LaMotte, V. (2014). Evaluation of a program designed to promote positive police and youth interactions. *Journal of Juvenile Justice*, 3(2), 55-71.

²² Watts, B., & Washington, H. (2014). *Evaluability assessment of the NAFL Youth & Police Initiative Training*. Center for Human Services Research, University at Albany, State University of New York.

²³ Leroux, E. J., & McShane, K. (2017). Changing youth attitudes toward the police through community policing programming. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(6), 810-822.

Police Attitudes towards Youth

Evaluations of four programs also examined potential improvements in police attitudes towards youth. Of three studies that used survey measures to investigate changes in police attitudes, only the evaluation of the PAL basketball tournament was associated with an improvement in police attitudes towards youth.^{2,21,22}

Interviews with officers from the Baltimore Outward Bound Police program highlight the challenges to improving police attitudes towards youth.¹⁶ Many police expressed feelings of apathy towards youth and shared their view that many Baltimore youth they interacted with were on the wrong path in life. Some police also described a subset of police who had become jaded or angry and given up on trying to help youth at all. Police found that participating in the intensive one-day mentoring program helped remind them of youths' potential, given the right environment and encouragement. Officers expressed that the length of the intervention was insufficient, however, especially given that they aren't typically able to have positive interactions with youth during their regular working hours.

Youth Social and Emotional Skills

Although many youth recreational programs aim to develop youth skills, only one evaluation investigated outcomes directly relevant to this goal.⁷ This was the methodologically strongest of recreational mentoring program evaluations identified, employing a non-random comparison group of students who didn't participate in the intervention. Police Working with Youth in Non-Enforcement Roles consisted of 17 separate programs with a common goal of allowing all youth an opportunity to spend time with police officers while engaging in challenging activities, gaining leadership skills, and having the opportunity to become involved in the community. Five communities offered police academies, six offered athletic and adventure activities, four offered Police Explorers/Scouts programs, and two offered after school programs in which police worked with youth in a variety of roles. Although this was not a school-based intervention, most of the youth in the programs and the comparison group were recruited from local high schools. The youth outcomes assessed included self-efficacy beliefs, perceptions of neighborhood support and available neighborhood activities, empathy for others, and presence of a caring adult. None of these outcomes differed significantly between youth who received mentoring and youth in the comparison group.⁷

Countering Extremism

One study used qualitative data gathered through focus groups to explore the possible effects of "More Than a Game," a year-long sports based mentoring program designed to counter violent extremism and foster social inclusion for youth, mostly Lebanese, living in Melbourne Australia.⁴ In addition to participating in a range of sporting activities, youth had the option to participate in police-led skill building workshops on topics such as conflict-resolutions and the role of police in the community. Youth in the focus groups conveyed that playing on cross-cultural sports teams helped break down cultural stereotypes and improve self-discipline. Youth also credited their police mentors for their efforts to foster a culture of inclusion and respect on their teams.

Non-Recreational Community-Based Mentoring Programs

Only three programs identified in this review were community-based mentoring programs without a significant recreational focus. The Youth Safe Havens Program, developed by the Eisenhower Foundation, is a notable example of an intervention model that intentionally positions police to be in

mentoring roles for youth in their communities. Briefly, this program is based on a police-community partnership model in which the community is the senior or lead partner. More specifically, it has been described as a merger of “the American concepts of afterschool youth safe havens, youth mentoring and community advocacy with the Japanese concept of a neighborhood-based police mini-station out of which officers work, prevent crime and assist citizens in the surrounding community” (p. 20). Although there is considerable local variation in how the program has been implemented, the Eisenhower Foundation requires “program youth to receive two hours of one-on-one civilian advocacy and mentoring each week, ten to fifteen hours of civilian group advocacy and mentoring by adults or near peers each week, and five hours of civilian tutoring and homework assistance each week. Police officers assist civilians mostly in group mentoring – but in some cases work with youth one-on-one” (pp. 30-31). Findings from several evaluations of the program using both quasi-experimental and experimental designs suggest desirable changes in youth outcomes, such as a lower likelihood of arrest and improved school performance, as well as area-based reductions in crime that may be attributable to implementation of Youth Safe Havens program. The methodological rigor of these evaluations, which are primarily unpublished, is somewhat difficult to assess based on the information available. More important, for purposes of this review, is that mentoring by police is only one of many components of the Safe Havens model, thus making it impossible based on available findings to know how much, if at all, it is contributing to the reported outcomes.

Two qualitative studies examined community-based mentoring programs outside of the US. The first is the Metropolitan Police Service’s (MPS) Volunteer Police Cadet (VPC) program, a long-standing program in London that aims to improve the relationship between police and young people.⁶ The program was open to all youth ages 14-19 at the time of the study, but it has since been expanded to youth as young as 10. Mentees, or “cadets,” were paired with mentors, usually police officers and had the opportunity to engage in a variety of police activities; for instance, some acted as test-purchasers, provided logistics support at events, or assisted with crime prevention initiatives. The London police also partnered with outside organizations to provide youth with a variety of recreational and volunteer opportunities. Interviews with cadets revealed that the program gave youth a sense of belonging and that they enjoyed developing bonds with police officers and other youth in fun, non-hostile environments. This sense of belonging also gave cadets a sense of discipline, as they didn’t want to disappoint their mentors and they were able to see themselves as capable through their program accomplishments. This desire to avoid negative behaviors was especially salient for youth who stayed with the program over multiple years and built a strong sense of identity around their participation.

The other community-based mentoring program was the Intensive Community Mentoring Scheme, a one-to-one mentoring program with a group component designed to meet the developmental needs of middle schoolers in high-crime areas of Hong Kong who were in mid- to lower-level education tracks.⁵ Volunteers, 80% of whom were active police officers, were provided with 30 hours of training, as well as ongoing training and support through a monthly mentor support night and access to an experienced supervisor. The program was a partnership between the local police department, non-government organizations, secondary schools, a university department, and a counseling association. About 30 volunteers who weren’t matched with mentees formed two separate working groups for activity planning and skill development. Mentors were tasked with meeting with their mentees 3-4 times a month for 12-18 months, including an optional group activity once a month where they engaged in social or skill building activities. Interviews with 48 mentees chosen at random indicated that the most widespread program benefit was social and cultural enrichment. About half of youth reported improved social support, communication skills, and studying habits. Furthermore, nine youth reported improved peer and parental relationships and eight reported improved school conduct.

School-Based Police Mentoring Programs

Other studies identified in this review were evaluations of police-mentoring programs based in schools and evaluations of the use of School Resource Officers that explicitly referred to mentoring. Compared to recreational programs, evaluations of school-based police mentoring programs had larger sample sizes and were much more likely to use a comparison group. School-based programs also served a wider age range of youth.

Perceptions of the Police and Police Legitimacy

The identified studies found support for positive impact of school-based police mentoring on youths' perceptions of police officers and police legitimacy and mixed support for improvement in perceptions of procedural justice. Two randomized control trials found evidence of improved perceptions of police for mentored youth. The first, Team Kids Challenge, was a 5-week in-school intervention in Compton, CA, in which uniformed police or fire-fighter mentors gave a presentation at an assembly that concluded with the message "Our job is helping people. We can't do this work by ourselves. We are truly inspired to learn how you will work together to make a difference in your community, and have one question for you. . . . Can we be on your team?" (p. 306)¹⁹ The officers next met with students in upper grades and Team Kids Coaches (typically college students or recent college graduates) to pose weekly community service challenges that the students voted on. This culminated in a school-wide fundraising carnival attended by all the students, law enforcement, and Team Kids Coaches. A study comparing 7 – 14-year-olds who participated in Team Kids Challenge with students at schools that didn't receive the intervention, found that students in the program significantly improved in their ratings of police legitimacy.¹³ Findings from another Team Kids Challenge study of 5th and 6th graders that did not use a comparison group suggest that, in addition to program participation, student perceptions of being assigned meaningful roles and responsibilities were also associated with improvements in perception of police. Program participation was also significantly associated with more positive perceptions of police from.¹⁹ A second program called Students Talking it Over with Police (STOP) was a 7-week educational program for middle school and high school students in Milwaukee, WI, who were identified as leaders in their communities (the authors note that "leader" was defined broadly to include youth who might not be considered leaders by adults but who have influence over their peers). This program was delivered in a small group format in which two officers worked with 12 students; the program utilized a standardized curriculum and was intended to help youth to gain a better understanding of law-enforcement and crime prevention.²⁴ Findings of the randomized control evaluation, in which 24 students in each of 36 schools were assigned to either STOP or a control group, found that participation in STOP was associated with a significant improvement in students' perceptions of the police, their willingness to talk to the police, and their perceptions of procedural justice.

A study of at-risk Israeli youth living in youth-village boarding schools provides additional evidence of the potential for mentoring from law enforcement to increase perceptions of police legitimacy.²⁵ The Police Studies Program paired youth with police for informal police activities like neighborhood watches or visiting police stations. Survey responses for youth who participated in the program were compared

²⁴ Freiburger, T. L. (2019). Improving youths' attitudes about the police: Results from an experimental design. *Criminal Justice Review*, 44(4), 413-430.

²⁵ Azmy, A. (2020). Police studies program for youth at risk: The role of police distributive justice and personal morality in explaining police legitimacy. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 11(4.2), 57-79.

with responses for youth who participated in a different non-police school program. Participation in the Police program was associated with higher ratings of police legitimacy, though it was not related to reports of police distributive justice (i.e., finding the police helpful and fair).

Other evaluations that did not test mentored youth against a comparison group nonetheless add to the evidence for the capacity of police mentoring to improve youths' perceptions of police. For instance, a study of TAPS Academy, a small group intervention for racial minority youth in Houston in which police and youth discussed topics like bullying and gang preventions, found that mentored youth improved their ratings of "social distance" with the police, referring to feelings of respect for the police and belief that they would be helpful in times of trouble.²⁶ Cross-sectional survey studies of middle school and high school youth found that more self-reported interactions with SROs were associated with improved positive perceptions of SROs, but with less school connectedness and higher levels of exposure to violence.²⁷ Perceived number of SRO interactions was not associated with feelings of safety, though students with more positive attitudes about SROs felt more safe.²⁸ In a study of SROs in an affluent suburban school district in which police made an effort to talk about their jobs, qualitative data gathered from SROs, school staff, and students indicate that police were largely successful in their efforts to show students that they can be trusted and turned to for help if needed.²⁹

Role of School Police Officers

Focus groups with 45 school police officers from the Pine School District Police Department in southern California asked officers to explain their day-to-day activities and challenges they faced at work. Findings highlighted large variations in the degree to which they incorporated mentoring into their jobs.⁸ Only 11% reported working in formal mentoring programs such as PAL, but many more indicated that they engaged in informal mentoring behaviors by providing students with career guidance or motivation (62%) or by counseling students on social or academic problems (44%). A small portion of the officers also reported that students trusted them and shared private matters with them (12%). Although police received a one-time 40 hour training in school policing, as well as yearly legal and safety code updates, many of the police in the study reported that their training was inadequate and that they learned what they know about child development while on the job.

Another study similarly used focus groups to investigate the role of SROs in two affluent suburban school districts.²⁹ Findings from SROs, students, and school staff indicated that SROs spent a great deal of time acting as "police ambassadors" by teaching youth that police are trustworthy and helpful and that negative interactions with the police resulted from criminal behavior, not police misconduct. Police recognized that many youth held negative perceptions of police from home or their peers and school staff reported that they tended to focus their efforts on younger students, students of color, and first-generation students, many of whom had parents without citizenship. SROs used different means to

²⁶ Jones, C. A., Penn, E. B., & Davenport, S. (2015). Social distance between minority youth and the police: An exploratory analysis of the TAPS academy. *Journal of Juvenile Justice*, 4(1).

²⁷ Theriot, M. T. (2016). The impact of school resource officer interaction on students' feelings about school and school police. *Crime & Delinquency*, 62(4), 446-469.

²⁸ Theriot, M. T., & Orme, J. G. (2016). School resource officers and students' feelings of safety at school. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 14(2), 130-146.

²⁹ Kupchik, A., Curran, F. C., Fisher, B. W., & Viano, S. L. (2020). Police Ambassadors: Student-Police Interactions in School and Legal Socialization. *Law & Society Review*, 54(2), 391-422.

develop rapport with students, such as greeting them in the hallway, learning their names, and joining them for lunch.

Crime and Feelings of Safety

Two studies found that the presence of SROs was associated with an increase in most types of school crime. The first, a study of 238 middle schools and high schools, found that schools with SROs had an increase in drug-related crimes and out of-school suspensions compared to similar schools without SROs, although serious crimes were reduced relative to non-SRO schools in cases where the SROs were present long term.³⁰ Another three year longitudinal study of 480 elementary, middle, and high schools found a similar increase in reported crime. Moreover, schools where SROs engaged in roles relating to education and mentorship reported more crimes than schools where SROs engaged only in law enforcement roles.³¹

Academic Outcomes

A randomized trial following 102 youth between the ages of 10 and 16 in disadvantaged metropolitan areas in Queensland, Australia, found that youth who participated in the Ability School Engagement Program had a significant reduction in truancy compared to youth at schools where truancy policies were implemented as usual.³² Program schools established partnerships between police, schools, families, and youth who were exhibiting attendance problems using a family conferencing model. Police officers helped monitor a student's action plan through visits and check-ins during months following an initial meeting with the family and school. In interviews with participants in a school-based police program that paired police with high risk students in the United Kingdom, youth expressed how one-to-one mentoring helped them to develop confidence in their abilities.³³ Many students described experiencing regret or shame over their academic failures, resulting in disengagement from school. They shared that the officers' empathetic and non-judgmental approach to mentoring helped them to develop the confidence necessary to re-engage in school and plan for their futures.

Limitations

There are a number of important limitations to consider in the extant research on law enforcement mentoring programs. First, because few studies have used evaluation designs that are well-suited to causal inference (e.g., random assignment to the intervention or a control group), available findings as a whole fail to provide a strong basis for inferring that the outcomes observed are attributable to program participation. Related to this, the nearly exclusive reliance on self-report measures presents risk for biased responding in the direction of favorable outcomes for reasons such as a desire to support programs or please evaluators or to justify personal time invested in the program.

Second, the evaluated programs are likely not representative of the true scope of police mentoring programs. Police-mentoring programs in recreational settings, for instance, appear to be relatively commonplace throughout the US, but this review found only a small number of programs that had been evaluated.

³⁰ Zhang, G. (2019). The effects of a school policing program on crime, discipline, and disorder: A quasi-experimental evaluation. *American journal of criminal justice*, 44(1), 45-62.

³¹ Devlin, D. N., & Gottfredson, D. C. (2018). The roles of police officers in schools: Effects on the recording and reporting of crime. *Youth violence and juvenile justice*, 16(2), 208-223.

³² Mazerolle, L., Antrobus, E., Bennett, S., & Eggin, E. (2017). Reducing truancy and fostering a willingness to attend school: Results from a randomized trial of a police-school partnership program. *Prevention Science*, 18(4), 469-480.

³³ Clarke, A. (2017). The holistic effect of police officers mentoring 'high risk' youth. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching & Mentoring*, 15(11), 123-132.

Third, many of the findings here relied on post-evaluation self-report measures that were restricted to the participants who completed the full program and were present on the day of the final survey. Because youth in some studies who did not complete the follow up surveys differed systematically in some important ways from youth who did, for instance they were more troubled²² or lower income,²¹ the evidence obtained for positive effects of these programs may have been inflated. Issues with attrition were not limited to youth participants. The authors of the PAL Basketball program reported high levels of study attrition by police officers, noting that police who dropped the study tended to stay in the basketball league and that reasons for not taking the final survey were related to both scheduling difficulties and discomfort with being evaluated.²

A third important limitation to consider is the failure to isolate effects of mentoring in multicomponent programs that provide other services or activities along with mentoring. This is of particular concern for SROs, whose role as mentors is poorly understood and highly variable. The Ability School Engagement Program truancy is another example of a program with multiple components in which the specific role of police mentoring in reducing truancy is yet to be established.²⁵

Fourth, because studies have relied predominantly on measures of attitudes, the extent to which program participation has been associated with improvement in youth and/or police behaviors is unclear.

Finally, only one study assessed outcomes in a long-term follow up.³¹ It is unclear whether reported changes in attitude reported endured past the end of interventions.

Conclusions

The findings presented here provide limited support that police mentoring programs can improve young peoples' attitudes towards police and beliefs in police legitimacy. Consistent with Intergroup Contact Theory,¹⁴ mere exposure does not seem to be sufficient to change youth attitudes. Rather, mentee attitudes tend to improve following structured activities that allow them to have meaningful discussions and collaborate with their mentors. An important caveat to these findings is that while youth attitudes towards police significantly improved across a variety of studies, negative attitudes towards police were not eliminated and it is unclear whether the changes are large enough to have real world implications. Furthermore, although there is evidence that some youth gained more nuanced perceptions of police legitimacy as a whole, others expressed that the "good cops" who volunteered to work with youth were different from the "bad cops" that they interacted with on the streets.^{16,23}

Overall, evidence is lacking to draw even preliminary conclusions about the effect (if any) of police mentoring on other targeted outcomes, including police attitude and behavior towards youth, youth attendance at school and justice system involvement, and youth social and emotional skills. Although the PAL study findings on improved police attitudes towards youth are promising, police attrition from the study hinder the generalizability of the results.² This finding suggests that engaging police officers in research on these topics may present unique challenges and that researchers should account for police culture in their study designs and methods.

The impact of sworn school police officers as mentors is even more obscure. The findings speak very little to the unique impact of SROs mentoring role, yet the significant association between mentoring and school crime in one study is concerning and requires deeper investigation.³¹

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this review, several recommendations can be made for both research and practice. Resources that may be useful in support of implementing these recommendations include the [Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™](#) of MENTOR, which provides evidence-informed guidance for mentoring program design and implementation in areas such as mentor recruitment and training and ongoing support of mentoring relationships, and the Measurement Guidance Toolkit for Mentoring Programs of the National Mentoring Resource Center, which includes recommended measures for assessing a range of youth outcomes and mentoring relationship quality as well as guidance for design of program evaluations.

Rigorously Test Effects of Programs on Intended Outcomes

As already suggested, there is a need for more evaluations with designs that can produce reliable and unbiased estimates of the effects of programs on targeted outcomes. This is especially the case for programs that focus on mentoring by law enforcement, without confounding multiple other program components. Rigorous evaluation of these programs (or planned variation in the provision of mentoring within multicomponent programs) will be essential for isolating and thus clarifying effects of mentoring by law enforcement. Where random assignment of youth and/or police to intervention and comparison groups is not feasible, identifying credible comparison groups from recruitment sources such as schools and police departments should be a priority.

Encourage One-on-One Collaboration, Especially in Larger Group Settings

Many of the identified programs consisted of one or more police officers working with a large number of youth. Implementing structured goal-driven activities and providing dedicated space and time for small-group discussions may help encourage youth who may hesitate to interact with a police officer in a larger group setting and help to ensure that mentors and mentees meet the “optimal contact” required to reduce intergroup prejudices.¹⁴

Use Mentoring to Engage Youth around Community Safety

Many of the mentoring programs with the most encouraging findings in this review engaged youth in community service or exposed them to careers in law enforcement. Providing ways for youth to share concerns and implement ideas for improving their communities could contribute positively to local community policing efforts while simultaneously helping young people build important life skills.

Measure Bi-Directional Changes in Attitude Over Time

The conditions under which youth attitudes toward police improved weren't sufficient for changing police attitudes towards youth in two of three studies that measured both outcomes. Police attitudes toward youth should be assessed in evaluations of more intensive mentoring programs and following mentor trainings. Standardized measures of police and youth attitudes are also needed with well-established reliability and validity and demonstrated sensitivity to change (in other words, police and youth should not rate one another so high there is no room for improvement).

Evaluate Outcomes at Later Points in Time Beyond the End of Program Participation

Programs and evaluators should attempt to measure attitude and other outcomes at points in time beyond the immediate end of programs. This will help to establish durability of any short-term

improvements in outcomes and also provide an opportunity to assess effects on outcomes that may become evident only at later points in the development of participating youth (e.g., juvenile justice involvement).

Implement Training and Support for Law Enforcement Professionals

Many police officers, not just those participating in formal mentoring programs, could benefit from training in youth mentoring and child development. Partnerships of law enforcement agencies with mentoring and other youth-serving organizations could be used to provide high quality training on these topics. Law enforcement professionals seem likely to also benefit from ongoing support to optimize their interactions with youth and to ensure that they have access to guidance and advice when dealing with difficult situations involving youth.

Clarify the Roles of Sworn School Police Officers

Schools with sworn police officers, including SROs, should carefully consider the potential harm that can arise when school police attempt to mentor youth while enforcing security. Boundaries and expectations of the role should be revised where necessary while taking into account the perspectives of students, police, and other stakeholders.

Table 1 Studies Reviewed

Program Name	Group Size	Age Targeted	Type of Mentoring	Type of Evaluation
Safe Havens ¹	One-to-One; Small Groups	Teen, Pre-teen	Community-Based	Randomized Control Trial; Quasi-Experimental Design
Police and Youth Interactions Programs ¹⁵	Small Groups; Large Groups	Teens	Community-Based; Recreational; Community Service	Pretest-Posttest
Police Athletic League - Unnamed Basketball Program ¹¹	Small Groups	Teens	Community-Based; Recreational	Pretest-Posttest
Police Working with Youth in Non-Enforcement Roles ⁷	Large Groups	Teens	Community-Based; Recreational; Community Service	Quasi-Experimental Design
Partnership Program between Toronto, CA and Their Police (Canada) ¹⁷	Large groups	Teens	Community-Based; Recreational; Law Enforcement	Pretest-Posttest
Ability School Engagement Program ³²	One-to-one	Pre-teens, Teens	School-Based	Randomized Control Trial
The Youth Community Alliance ¹²	Large Groups	Teens	Community-Based; Recreational; Law Enforcement	Pretest-Posttest
Team Kids Challenge ^{13,19}	Large Groups	Kids, Pre-teens, Teens	School-Based/ Community Service	Pretest-Posttest; Randomized Control Trial
TAPS Academy ²⁶	Small Groups	Teens	School-Based; Law Enforcement	Pretest-Posttest

Students Talking it Over with Police (STOP) ²⁴	Large Groups	Pre-teens, Teens	School-Based; Law Enforcement	Randomized Control Trial
Youth-Police Initiative ¹⁶	Small Groups	Teens	Community-Based; Recreational; Law Enforcement	Pretest-Posttest
Police Studies Program (Israel) ²⁵	Small Groups	Teens	Community-Based; Law Enforcement	Cross-Sectional Survey Design
More than a Game (Australia) ⁴	Small Groups	Teens	Community-Based; Recreational	Cross-Sectional Survey Design; Semi-Structured Interviews; Focus Groups
The Baltimore Outward Bound Police Program ¹⁶	Small Group	Pre-Teen	Community-Based; Recreational	Interviews
Volunteer Police Cadet program (England) ⁶	Large Groups	Teens	Community-Based; Law Enforcement	Focus Groups
Intensive Community Mentoring Scheme (China) ⁵	One-to-One; Large Groups	Teens	Community-Based	Interviews
Unnamed Mentoring Program (England) ³³	One-to-one	Teens	School-Based	Interviews
Pine School Police Officers ⁸	Large Groups	Kids, Pre-teens, Teens	School-Based; School Safety	Focus Groups
School Resource Officers ²⁹	Large Groups	Kids, Pre-Teens, Teens	School-Based; School Safety	Focus Groups
School Resource Officers ³⁰	Large Groups	Pre-Teens, Teens	School-Based; School Safety	Quasi-Experimental Design
School Resource Officers ³¹	Large Groups	Kids, Pre-Teens, Teens	School-Based; School Safety	Longitudinal
School Resource Officers ^{27,28}	Large Groups	Pre-Teens, Teens	School-Based; School Safety	Cross-Sectional Survey Design
School Resource Officers ³²	Large Groups	Pre-Teens, Teens	School-Based; School Safety	Randomized Control Trial

*Group sizes are estimated in some cases; small groups consisted of 2-10 mentees; large groups consisted of 11+

**School resource officer studies are considered as separate programs due to variations in law enforcement expectations and roles.