



Mentoring Youth in Rural Settings

National Mentoring Resource Center Evidence Review

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SUMMARY

This review examines research on mentoring for youth who reside in rural settings. The review is organized around four topics: (1) the documented effectiveness of mentoring for youth residing in rural settings; (2) the extent to which mentor, youth, and program characteristics/practices influence effectiveness of mentoring youth in rural settings; (3) the intervening processes that may link mentoring rural youth to youth outcomes; and (4) the extent to which efforts to reach and engage youth in rural settings achieve high-quality implementation and adopt and sustain programs over time. Over the past few decades, and especially in the last ten years, there has been a slowly growing body of research on mentoring youth in rural settings although much of it lacks methodological rigor (e.g., representative samples, randomization). Despite limitations, findings from the existing research indicate the following conclusions:

1. Informal and formal mentoring in rural settings shows promise of being effective in promoting health and well-being among youth in several domains (e.g., physical health, academics), although some mentoring outcomes (e.g., juvenile delinquency) have yet to be studied in rural settings. Further, informal and formal mentoring of minoritized youth, specifically sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY) and youth of color (also referred to as racially/ethnically minoritized youth) in rural settings shows promise of being beneficial to youth occupying multiple minoritized identities across several domains of youth well-being.
2. Much of the research on mentoring in rural settings focuses on the role of informal mentors or more grassroots, homegrown mentoring programs. Despite the presence of more seasoned programs, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, Boys/Girls Scouts, National FFA Organization, and 4-H (Head, Heart, Hands, and Health) in rural areas, there is very limited empirical research data on the effectiveness of these formal mentoring programs. Given the limited research and mixed findings regarding the extent to which mentor, youth, and program characteristics influence the effectiveness of mentoring youth in rural settings, it is challenging to draw definitive conclusions, highlighting the need for more research.
3. Relational characteristics appear to be important factors driving, in part, positive mentoring outcomes among youth in rural settings. Additionally, the limited research offers promising evidence that promotion of skills (e.g., emotion regulation, social skills) and instilling in youth a sense of mattering and future orientation are potential mechanisms of positive change in mentoring outcomes among rural youth. Finally, qualitative research suggests that mechanisms of change for minoritized youth (e.g., SGMY) may include reduced feelings of internalized minority

stress (e.g., feeling shame about one's LGBTQ+ identity) and increased feelings of pride in one's identities. Similarly, for youth in rural settings, such as Indigenous youth, connection to culture is likely an important component of effective mentoring relationships.

4. Research suggests that some challenges to mentoring youth in rural settings are more pronounced than in urban settings. These challenges include lack of services and resources; recruiting and retaining mentors; identifying meaningful and varied mentor-mentee activities; transportation challenges given vast nature of many rural communities and distance between mentors and mentees; and financial challenges.
5. Mentoring in rural communities tends to focus on different outcomes than in urban communities (general youth development and life skills in rural communities versus educational attainment and poverty alleviation in urban communities). The potential for mentoring in rural communities to influence on a number of outcomes therefore is not yet well understood.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of research documenting the positive outcomes (i.e., psychological, social, academic) as well as reductions in substance use and juvenile delinquency (e.g., physical fighting, vandalism)^{1,2,3,4,5} associated with formal and informal mentoring. The vast majority of this research, however, has been conducted with youth residing in urban/suburban areas.⁶ Indeed, in a recent meta-analysis of 70 mentoring outcome studies that focused on adult mentors and youth mentees, 87 percent included samples of urban/suburban youth and/or their mentors, 4 percent were rural, and 9 percent were mixed geographic locales.⁶ Whereas outcomes did not vary as a function of geographic locale in this meta-analysis, a different meta-analysis of six studies of cross-age peer mentoring found that outcomes were more strongly positive in urban compared to rural settings.⁷ Although not specific to mentoring research, the challenges to conducting research in rural settings are well-documented^{8,9,10} and likely explain, in part, why research on mentoring in rural settings is limited.

Research has documented rural and urban differences in funding (e.g., rural programs operate on fewer funds than urban programs), implementation challenges (e.g., rural programs report more challenges in recruiting mentors than urban programs), implementation strengths (e.g., youth in rural settings are more likely to have their mentor stay with them for the target time), and program strengths/outcomes (e.g., rural programs report longer average match lengths than urban programs).^{11,12}

Definitions

This population review considers research with mentoring youth under the age of 18 who reside in rural or non-urban settings. When referring to rural settings, this review drew on the widely used United States Census Bureau's definitions.^{13,14} According to the U.S. Census Bureau, rural areas are "any population, housing, or territory NOT in an urban area." Further, there are two types of urban areas. First, there are urbanized areas which have a population of 50,000 or more. Second, there are urban clusters that have a population of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000.^{13,14} Compared to urban areas, rural areas are less dense, have sparse populations, have more limited land use (i.e., are not "built up"), and are at a distance from other developed areas.¹³ Approximately 19 percent of the United States population (nearly 60 million people) resides in rural or non-urban settings.¹⁵ Further, there is vast diversity in the demographic make-up across rural communities. For example, in over 2,000 rural and small-town census tracts, persons of color make up the majority of the population.¹⁶ For example, 40 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN or preferably known as Indigenous/Native American/First Nation) live in rural settings, while only 22 percent of the Indigenous population resides on reservations and/or similar land.¹⁷ Further, there is variability across rural communities in rates of poverty as well as the presence of sexual and gender minorities (SGMs).^{16,18,19}

Mentoring refers to relationships and activities that occur between a mentee (in this review youth under 18) and an older more experienced person (i.e., mentor; often a nonparental adult) who are serving in a non-professional helping and supportive capacity to promote positive mentee outcomes.²⁰ Peer-to-peer mentoring or cross-age peer mentoring is defined as the pairing of an older youth with a younger youth for the purposes of promoting positive mentee outcomes.²¹ The review is inclusive of all types of youth mentoring that may occur in rural settings including but not limited to natural support/informal mentoring and formal mentoring; individual and group mentoring; youth-adult mentoring as well as peer-to-peer/cross-age peer mentoring.

Overview of Current Review

Although the body of literature of mentoring youth in rural settings is growing, there remains a lack of literature (both academic and nontechnical reports) synthesizing and critiquing the extant research on outcomes of mentoring youth in rural settings. As such, this review only examines research on mentoring for youth who reside in rural settings. The review is organized around four topics: (1) the documented effectiveness of mentoring for youth residing in rural settings; (2) the extent to which mentor, youth, and program characteristics and practices influence effectiveness of mentoring youth in rural settings; (3) the intervening processes that may link mentoring rural youth to youth outcomes; and (4) the extent to which efforts to reach and engage youth in rural settings achieve high-quality implementation and adopt and sustain programs over time. As we discuss these topics, we include consideration of minoritized youth (e.g., sexual and gender minority youth [SGMY], racial/ethnic minority youth, youth with health, mental health, and substance abuse concerns, as well as youth who live in poverty) residing in rural settings and the ways in which mentoring may need to be adapted for diverse populations in rural settings.

In addition to this population review, information on mentoring in rural settings can be found in several other population reviews under National Mentoring Resource Center Population Review by the National Resource Center, including [Mentoring for American Indian and Alaska Native Youth](#) and [E-Mentoring](#). Readers may also wish to read a recent article by [Barry and Pollack \(2022\)](#) summarizing research on youth mentoring in rural settings.

Identification of Sources

In searching for articles, reports, and other types of documents, the authors used a combination of keywords specific to both mentoring (e.g., mentor, mentoring) and rural setting (e.g., rural, remote, nonurban). In addition to searching library databases (e.g., PubMed, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, PsycINFO), the authors used Google and Google Scholar and included materials based on knowledge of the field as well as referrals. The reference lists of sources identified via these strategies were also reviewed to identify additional articles, reports, and other types of documents, and forward searching of key documents were sometimes conducted. Of note, sources were limited to mentoring of youth in the United States.

DOCUMENTED EFFECTIVENESS OF MENTORING FOR YOUTH RESIDING IN RURAL SETTINGS

1

BACKGROUND

To address the documented effectiveness of mentoring for youth residing in rural settings, this review focused primarily on quantitative studies with designs that allow reasonably strong causal inferences (i.e., comparison groups) about effectiveness. There were 10 such studies. Although some of these studies did not find positive impacts of mentoring youth in rural spaces, most studies documented positive outcomes of mentoring for rural youth. While these studies offer important information, their findings should be considered within the context of their methodological research limitations (e.g., representative samples, randomization). These limitations mean that research may not be generalizable to other youth in rural settings (outside of where the research was conducted) and that we cannot say that mentoring caused positive outcomes, just that it is associated with those outcomes. Further, it is important to keep in mind that some outcomes of mentoring measured in urban settings are less studied (or not studied at all) in rural settings. For example, research with samples of urban youth document that mentoring leads to reductions in juvenile delinquency.^{1,2,3,4,5} However, to date, there is no research to our knowledge on how mentoring impacts juvenile delinquency among rural youth. This does not mean that mentoring does not move the needle on juvenile delinquency outcomes among rural youth; it means that we do not know due to the lack of research. For example, Dr. Anne Hobbs at the University of Nebraska Omaha, leads a program evaluation opportunity where college students assess juvenile justice programs in rural settings and also leads a mentoring program for youth returning to their communities from rehabilitation/treatment placement (see <https://www.unl.edu/criminal-justice/juvenile-mentoring>). To date, however, no research has been published that directly states the effectiveness of this program on youth residing in rural settings. Nevertheless, based on the limited available literature, programmatic mentoring in rural communities appears to hold promise for promoting health and well-being among youth in rural settings, including minoritized youth in rural settings, in the domains that have been studied.

RESEARCH

Mentoring Outcomes among Rural Youth

Mentoring programs appear to contribute to improved physical health of youth residing in rural settings. In a study evaluating the effectiveness of having 10th grade students' mentor 7th grade students to be physically active, results from a nonrandomized pre-post study demonstrated reductions in sedentary activity and sugar consumption and increases in moderate and vigorous activity.²² Similarly, earlier published results from a group-randomized control trial of the same mentoring program in Appalachian schools found that a peer mentoring behavioral skill mentoring program for obese high school youth led to more weight loss than youth who received a teacher-led program.²³

In addition to physical health, one study with high school students in rural Missouri showed that youth involved in the school-based group-matched mentoring program (which included comprehensive after school programming, life-coaching, and career planning), compared to youth in the control condition, demonstrated reductions in past month use of tobacco, alcohol, and inhalants and increases in social skills and interest in higher education.²⁴ This study reminds us it is difficult to tease apart the unique benefits of mentoring situated within larger skills-based interventions. It is also difficult to tease apart what mentoring characteristics drive change for youth in rural settings, recognizing that individuals may respond differently to different program components.

A 20-year non-experimental evaluation of a school-based cross-age peer mentoring project in a low-income rural community, students (ages 10 to 13) with elevated vulnerabilities or distress were matched with a high school student mentor (ages 15 to 18).²⁵ Results indicated that mentored youth showed increases in school and community belonging, sense of purpose, motivation, and agency. There is also preliminary evidence that peer mentoring may contribute to enhanced educational aspirations and outcomes among youth involved in the child welfare system and with families with substance use disorders.²⁶

The preliminary evidence for effectiveness on academic outcomes for youth in rural areas is further corroborated by qualitative and other non-experimental studies suggesting that that mentoring programs may enhance youths' interest in STEM-related careers,^{27,28} mentoring more broadly may enhance youths' interest in higher education.²⁹ Also, high school coaches and informal mentors may serve as mentors to help reduce academic failure and school drop-out.^{30,31,32}

However, other studies of mentoring programs in rural communities are more mixed. For example, in a study of structured, cross-age peer mentoring, results from the randomized study found mentored students compared to non-mentored students had greater connectedness to school and parents (caregivers) but that other outcomes (e.g., self-esteem) were unrelated to being mentored.³³ It is important to note that this study was one of only a few randomized trials of mentoring outcomes in rural settings. Further, a study of 7th grade mentees and high school mentors in a rural, impoverished community in Georgia, documented increases in future orientation between mentored versus non-mentored students but no differences in mentored versus non-mentored students in school connectedness.³⁴

Mentoring Outcomes among Rural Youth Occupying Minoritized Identities

A growing body of research has begun to focus on mentoring outcomes among rural youth who occupy minoritized identities. This work is critically needed given that youth occupying minoritized identities (e.g., sexual and gender minority youth [SGMY], youth of color) often experience more hostile school and community environments than do minoritized youth in urban settings, all of which is consistent with theories of minority stress.³⁵ For example, research suggests that SGMY in rural communities experience more SGM-identity-based rejection and victimization than SGMY in urban communities^{36,37} although others have challenged the dominant paradigm that rural communities are dangerous spaces for SGMY and highlighted positive experiences of SGMY in rural communities.³⁸ Further, research suggests that racism that occurs in some rural communities can have devastating impacts on youth of color in these communities.^{39,40,41,42} Whereas mentors may play a critical role in buffering against the deleterious impacts associated with minority stressors, there may be challenges in some rural communities finding a mentor, who would be accepting and affirming of youth with a minoritized identity.

Preliminary non-experimental research suggests that overall youth of color in rural settings benefit from mentoring. In one study, results showed that natural mentoring relationships characterized by high levels of instrumental and emotional support and positive affective interactions were associated with lower anger, rule-breaking behavior, and aggression among Black youth in high school in rural Georgia.⁴³ In a study of Latinx youth (8th and 9th grade) with academic and behavioral issues in an after-school program with white, non-Latinx mentors in rural Utah, experiencing a positive mentor-mentee relationship was associated with enhanced grades and school connectedness.⁴⁴ Further, youth in rural communities with natural mentors reported increased life satisfaction.⁴⁵ Research also suggests that culturally grounded mentoring may reap a number of benefits on rural Native youth, as discussed in a case study suggesting positive educational outcomes and positively impacting the youth's cultural identity.³⁰ Some of these positive findings should be considered tentative given limited methodological rigor (e.g., lack of randomization) and some null findings perhaps related to lack of statistical power. For example, in a study of 15 Black youth, absenteeism did not improve following engagement with an adult mentor despite evidence that mentees connected with their

mentor.⁴⁶

Several studies have examined mentoring SGMY in rural settings. One mixed method study found that transgender youth involved in an after-school group mentoring program in rural Hawaii, compared to transgender youth not involved in the program fared better in academic performance, educational and career aspirations, self-esteem, mental health (i.e., less suicidality), social support, confidence to prevent themselves from experiencing harassment/violence, not feeling rushed to undergo sex reassignment surgery, abstaining from alcohol and drugs, and engaging in safe sexual practices.⁴⁷ Another study examined informal mentoring for SGMY high school youth or college students in rural Pennsylvania via qualitative interviews myriad benefits to these relationships, including increased self-awareness, self-acceptance, and hope for the future and decreased loneliness and isolation.⁴⁸ In these interviews, SGMY described the challenges that they faced with self- and other- acceptance, often rooted in religiosity, and how informal mentors help to buffer against non-acceptance of others and enhance self-acceptance. Finally, in a study of sexual minority youth, having a mentor was unrelated to level of distress.⁴⁹ The authors point out that the way in which mentoring was measured (i.e., important adult who has made an impact on your life) may have driven the findings especially since the extent to which impactful adults were aware of and/or affirming of youths' sexual minority status was unknown.⁴⁹ Further, another study found that having a mentor contributed to enhanced rural lesbian youths' ability to cope with stressors, including those specific to occupying a sexual minority identity.⁵⁰

CONCLUSIONS

1. Research supports the promise of informal and formal mentors being effective in promoting health and well-being among rural youth in several domains (e.g., physical health, academics), although some notable outcomes (e.g., juvenile delinquency) have yet to be studied in rural settings.
2. Informal and formal mentoring of minoritized youth (specifically SGMY and youth of color) in rural settings shows promise of being beneficial to youth occupying multiple minoritized identities across several domains of well-being.

EXTENT TO WHICH MENTOR, YOUTH, AND PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS AND PRACTICES INFLUENCE EFFECTIVENESS OF MENTORING YOUTH IN RURAL SETTINGS

2

BACKGROUND

In addition to documenting the extent to which mentoring youth in rural settings promotes positive youth development, it is important to document factors that influence the impact of youth being mentored in rural settings. Previous meta-analyses have examined factors that impact the relation between an intervention and outcome, but none of this research has been specific to youth in rural settings. Past studies, focused mostly or exclusively on urban youth, suggest that whereas a number of mentee/mentor (e.g., demographics, ability status) and program (e.g., one-on-one versus group mentoring) characteristics are unrelated to youth outcomes,^{5,6,51,52,53,54} better outcomes are observed in programs that serve a larger proportion of male youth, programs that have a large percentage of male mentors, programs that rely on mentors with a helping profession background, programs that require *shorter* meetings, programs that are targeted and skills-based, and mentoring relationships characterized by relatedness, social support, and advocacy. There is extremely limited research to date on the extent to which mentor, youth, program characteristics and practices as well as geographic proximity and resources influence outcomes of mentoring youth in rural settings. The five studies that do exist are reviewed below.

One potential strategy that may help to reduce barriers is to increase the use of technology so that mentors and mentees can meet in virtual spaces. E-mentoring includes use of technology such as web-based video conferencing software as well as phone, email, and text messaging.⁵⁵ Research also documents that e-mentoring programs can successfully establish mentor-mentee bonding and rapport⁵⁶ and that time-limited mentoring programs can be efficacious.⁶ In addition to overcoming transportation barriers, e-mentoring opens options for adults from outside the youth's community to provide mentorship. This may be especially beneficial for some youth (e.g., SGMY) who otherwise may not have access to supportive, affirming mentors. Although there may be challenges around confidentiality and safety, preliminary research suggests that online interventions for SGMY (including SGMY who are not "out" and thus have waivers of guardian permission), can be done safely and impactfully (see <https://reporter.nih.gov/search/j13CzOm06U6RewHg5w93CQ/project-details/10131510>). Nevertheless, the use of technology to enhance mentoring access and longevity can be challenging if internet services are unstable, lacking, and/or unaffordable. However, research suggests that 7 of 10 rural Americans have broadband internet at home although it is less likely to be high speed compared to their urban and suburban counterparts⁵⁷ and there are ongoing challenges with cell phone coverage in rural communities.⁵⁸

For Native youth, using Elders and trusted adults as well as the youth's culture are characteristics that may influence the effectiveness of mentoring. For example, a mixed-methods study of Native youth in a rural area points to the potential for incorporating cultural values into program implementation. Specifically, the Today & Beyond Mentoring Intervention Program became more beneficial to the youth when it began to involve Elders and trusted adult leaders and utilized cultural concepts and traditions with their intervention. This suggests that perhaps having support and acceptance of other trusted adults and culture for the mentoring programming might be important in building trust with rural (especially minoritized) youth.³⁰

RESEARCH

Characteristics of Youth that Impact Outcomes

A few studies have examined how characteristics of youth (e.g., demographics, risk/stress levels) impact mentoring outcomes in rural settings. For example, among Black high school students in Georgia, natural mentoring relationships characterized by high levels of instrumental and emotional support and positive affective interactions were associated with lower anger, rule-breaking behavior, and aggression; the effects were strongest for youth experiencing higher as compared to lower levels of life stress.⁴³ However, family support and youth gender were unrelated to those outcomes suggesting that natural mentoring relationships worked similarly for youth high and low in family support and equally well for boys and girls (like most studies, trans and gender diverse identities were not mentioned/measured).⁴³

In a study evaluating the effectiveness of having 10th grade students' mentor 7th grade students to be physically active using a nonrandomized pre-post design, findings indicated that outcomes varied by gender; although improvements were observed for both boys and girls, decreases in sugar intake and sedentary activity, as well as increases in physical activity were stronger for boys.²² Results from a group-randomized control trial in Appalachian schools found that a behavioral skill mentoring program for obese high school youth led to greater weight loss for obese girls compared to obese boys.²³ Further, although not documented via traditional quantitative moderation analyses, in a study on informal mentoring for SGMY high school youth and college students in rural Pennsylvania, qualitative interviews documented that trans and gender diverse youth benefited just as much from informal mentoring as did cisgender, sexual minority youth.⁴⁸ While there appear to be important gender differences in the effects of mentoring for youth in rural settings, the exact nature of those differences may depend on the mentoring approach, the setting in which it occurs and the outcome of interest.

Characteristics of Mentors that Impact Outcomes

Three studies examined how characteristics of mentors may affect outcomes. In a study of structured, cross-age peer mentoring of rural youth, results suggest that changes in self-esteem, social skills, and behavioral competence did not vary between mentored versus unmentored students.³³ However, among students who were mentored, mentor attendance predicted positive changes in outcomes. Indeed, mentors' inconsistent attendance predicted decreases in self-esteem and behavioral componence suggesting that having no mentor at all is better than having an inconsistent mentor.³³ Also, another study found that outcomes among peer mentors improved in the areas of school involvement, school connection, and social capital regardless of whether the matches were the same or different genders.⁵⁹ Similarly, in the Today & Beyond Mentoring Intervention Program, interactions with college student mentors contributed to Native youth increasing their interests in staying in school, asking questions, exploring which classes to take, and getting more involved in school activities when compared with a comparison group of non-Native students.³⁰

CONCLUSIONS

1. Although mentoring is occurring in many forms in rural settings, the lack of research on the extent to which mentor, youth, and program characteristics influence the effectiveness of mentoring youth in rural settings makes it challenging to draw definitive conclusions.

INTERVENING PROCESSES THAT MAY LINK MENTORING RURAL YOUTH TO YOUTH OUTCOMES

3

BACKGROUND

A critical component to researching mentoring outcomes is understanding the mechanisms through which mentoring may lead to positive impact. Previous research including meta-analytic research has examined intermediary outcomes and change mechanisms of mentoring program impact but most of this research is not with mentoring in rural settings. Understanding mediators of mentoring programming impacts in rural settings can provide important information used to enhance the effectiveness of mentoring programs across rural communities. In other words, *why* is mentoring youth in rural settings effective? We review the limited literature next that seeks to answer this question.

RESEARCH

Relational Processes

Most research on change mechanisms in mentoring outcome evaluation research has focused on relational processes in mentoring relationships. For example, in a study of Latinx youth (8th and 9th grade) with academic and behavioral issues in an after-school program with white, non-Latinx mentors in rural Utah, positive outcomes (i.e., improved GPA, school connectedness) were driven by relational characteristics (e.g., support, role modeling) and student perceptions that the mentoring process was “fun”.⁴⁴ However, mentors reported that at times cultural differences were sources of stress to mentors, which resulted in two mentors withdrawing from the project.⁴⁴

In a mixed-methods study of transgender youth involved in an after-school group mentoring program in Hawaii, transgender youth cited having positive transgender adult role models and peer support as the factors that led to positive changes across multiple domains including: academic performance, educational and career aspirations, self-esteem, mental health (i.e., less suicidality), social support, confidence to prevent themselves from experiencing harassment/violence, not feeling rushed to undergo sex reassignment surgery, abstaining from alcohol and drugs, and engaging in safe sexual practices.⁴⁷ Similarly, in a study of informal mentoring for SGMY high school youth or college students in rural Pennsylvania via qualitative interviews, characteristics of mentors that facilitated positive change (i.e., increased self-awareness, self-acceptance, and hope for the future and decreased loneliness and isolation) included being a good listener, being open-minded and non-judgmental taking a genuine interest in the mentee; having shared interests; providing mentees with information about postsecondary educational opportunities; and being intolerant of discriminatory behavior.⁴⁸

In a study of rural middle school students mentored by community college students, results from an email mentoring program found that mentees valued their relationship with their mentors, specifically someone to communicate with. Mentors felt that the program facilitated altruism. Middle school personnel felt the email mentoring program was valuable because it connected youth with positive role models.⁶⁰

Finally, mechanisms of positive change in a school-based cross-age peer mentoring project included the mentor (ages 15 to 18) listening and being there for their mentee (ages 10 to 13). Mentors benefited from support of school counselors to provide modeling, guidance, advice, and support.²⁵

Other Mechanisms of Change

In a study of Black high school students in rural Georgia, results show that future orientation and self-regulation mediated the relationship between informal mentoring processes (instrumental and emotional support and positive affective interactions) and outcomes (lower anger, rule-breaking behavior, and aggression).⁴³

In a case study of rural communities in Missouri of the impact of 4-H and FFA programs⁶¹, five programmatic elements facilitated the creation of social capital between rural youth and their adult mentors: (1) youth and adult leader engagement throughout the process; (2) broad community participation through youth-led forums; (3) shared leadership for projects with high public value; (4) sustained focus on results and impacts over time; and (5) community celebration and recognition of roles and contributions of youth. Similarly, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) suggests that the integrating outdoor activities into mentoring may help to build protective factors in youth in rural settings.⁶²

Although not studied specifically within the context of mentoring youth in rural locales in the United States, fostering positive racial/ethnic identity development in racially/ethnically minoritized youth is likely an important mechanism of change in mentoring youth of color in rural settings. Although not specific to mentoring, there is a growing body of research in the United States with racially/ethnically minoritized youth, including Native American youth, about the protective role of connection to culture/cultural identity^{63,64,65,66} and a growing interest in the potentially transformative role of critical mentoring⁶⁷ with youth of color and other minoritized youth although we know little about critical mentoring in rural settings.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Although research is limited, relational processes appear to be important factors driving positive mentoring outcomes among youth in rural settings, suggesting that authenticity, empathy, collaboration, support, autonomy, and companionship are key change mechanisms in youth mentoring outcomes.
2. The limited research suggests that building social-emotional skills (e.g., self-regulation) and instilling in youth a sense of mattering and future orientation are potential mechanisms of positive change in mentoring outcomes among rural youth.
3. Limited evidence suggests that mechanisms of change for minoritized youth (e.g., SGMY) associated with mentoring may include reduced feelings of internalized minority stress (e.g., feeling shame about one's LGBTQ+ identity) and increased feelings of pride in one's identities; similarly, for rural youth who identify as Indigenous/Native, enhanced ethnic/racial identity and/or connection to culture may be important mechanisms.

THE EXTENT TO WHICH EFFORTS TO REACH AND ENGAGE YOUTH IN RURAL SETTINGS ACHIEVE HIGH-QUALITY IMPLEMENTATION AND ADOPT AND SUSTAIN PROGRAMS OVER TIME

4

BACKGROUND

The research considered for this review provides little attention to efforts to reach and engage youth in rural settings in mentoring. Extant research makes it difficult to share conclusive statements regarding the quality of implementation as well as the sustainability of youth mentoring efforts in rural settings. Thus, in what follows we draw on available research when possible but also on broader knowledge of prevention and intervention efforts in rural communities as well as practice-based wisdom.

RESEARCH

Program Implementation

Compared to programs in urban settings, mentoring programs in rural settings report greater challenges with specific areas of program implementation including identifying meaningful activities for youth and mentors to do with one another as well as challenges with mentor recruitment.¹¹ Another barrier to mentoring youth in rural settings is transportation as rural mentors may be matched with youth who live far away.⁶⁸ Indeed, a 1990 process evaluation of a mentoring program that matched middle school students with adult mentors in a rural community found that about half of the mentor-mentee dyads did not meet regularly due to problems with scheduling, transportation, and/or communication.⁶⁹ Although the extent to which this single and dated study is relevant today is unknown, there are still likely challenges in rural communities with mentor unavailability or lack of engagement, which is concerning given that this can be harmful to youth mentees.⁶⁹

Further, in rural as compared to urban settings, mentoring is more likely to be delivered in programs where mentoring is indirectly incorporated into existing programming, such as Boys and Girls Scouts, National FFA Organization, churches, and schools where K-12 are housed together.^{70,71} However, a 4-H program modified their program to provide direct mentoring to Native American youth at the Standing Rock Reservation in Sioux County, North Dakota. Specifically, they applied the Community Capitals Framework by incorporating cultural activities and engaging businesses and community organizations, and found their program led to positive cultural, social, and financial changes in the community.⁷²

Further, the challenges for rural communities to adapt programming developed by national organizations may limit the potential of such new initiatives as they are geared towards urban communities.⁷³ However, the national program, Big Brothers Big Sisters, is finding ways to serve rural communities, via their Rural Initiatives, which has documented that 70 percent of their agencies serve youth in rural settings.⁷⁴

It is also important to consider the strengths of rural settings and the opportunities that they can afford for program implementation. Open land can be an ecological asset for positive youth development in rural settings.⁷⁵ The National Recreation and Park Association argues that nature can help promote youths' mental health: "We wanted to explore one of the greatest assets that each

grantee has at his/her disposal — the ability to connect mentees and mentors to the healing and inspiring power of nature” (p. 22).⁶² Afterschool programs also provide a ripe opportunity for the integration of mentors alongside other enriching after school activities.⁷⁶

Funding and Resources

Another challenge to mentoring in rural communities is funding for program implementation and sustainability. The average budget for rural mentoring programs (\$66,537) is significantly lower than urban mentoring programs (\$169,696), and rural mentoring programs serve about 78 youth per program compared to 308 youth served by urban mentoring programs.¹¹ Similarly, fundraising efforts for mentoring programs are more limited in rural settings compared to urban settings⁷⁷ which produces fewer funds for staff, activities, and transportation. This, in turn, affects the organization’s ability to accomplish its mission and engage in effective strategic planning. For example, a small organization with just one or two staff members could be devastated by the turnover of just one staff member. Further, as noted by the Boys & Girls Clubs of America,⁷³ there is often a lack of board members and then of the existing board members, they often lack the knowledge of development and fundraising efforts in rural settings.

Also, in general, many rural communities lack adequate resources, including lack of adequate health care as well as mental health care,⁷⁸ limited human service resources to support families struggling financially,⁷⁹ shortage of available childcare,⁸⁰ limited crisis intervention services for domestic and related forms of violence,⁸¹ lack of transportation options,⁸² and few organizations (e.g., cultural, LGBTQ+) that focus on unique needs of minoritized populations. The lack of resources likely impacts informal and formal mentoring in several ways. First, mentors often help connect youth to community-based resources. However, mental health and substance abuse services are critical resources often lacking in rural areas,⁶⁸ making it challenging for mentors to be able to connect youth to needed services. Technology can offer potentially valuable approaches to addressing these challenges. For example, Virtual Mentorship Network (VMN) used an online or e-mentoring format to provide supportive mentoring as well as role modeling for youth to consider mental health and substance abuse work in rural areas in their future.⁶⁸

Leveraging Strengths of Rural Communities

Rural settings contain about one-fifth of the United States population; however, each rural setting has its own individual strengths and barriers. Such variability across rural settings can make it difficult to implement mentoring programs designed in urban settings.⁷³ Similarly, programs developed in one rural community may be difficult to transfer to another rural community. As one example, there are 573 federally recognized tribes in the United States⁸³ with many residing in rural communities and speaking different languages and practicing varied cultural practices and traditions. These differences would make it difficult to adopt a program developed in one tribal community to another without considerable adaptation to meet the cultural traditions, language, and values in the new community. Consistent with participatory action research approaches, mentoring program adaptations for rural communities will likely be most successful if community leadership and voice is part of all stages beginning with identification of the mentoring program to be adapted.

Recognition of the strengths in rural communities can serve to enhance buy-in for mentoring and could be leveraged to help reduce implementation barriers and foster positive youth development.⁸⁴ More specifically, in many rural settings, there is a strong sense of community and desire to help others,⁸⁵ as well as a “sense of connection around common concerns” that “encourages a growing sense of pride, active involvement from a wide cross-section of citizens, and solid support for youth development efforts. There is a persistent hope that, together, “we can make things better here.”⁸⁶ Research has also identified strengths of individuals, including youth, in rural communities including sense of purpose, religious involvement, connection to culture (e.g., youth who identify with being Indigenous/Native on rural reservations), psychological endurance, compassion, generativity, and community support.^{87,88} Thus, mentoring initiatives in rural spaces can leverage existing strengths

inherent to rural communities and rural youth to promote positive youth development across myriad domains. At the same time, some rural communities may need support in increasing acceptance of SGMY and youth of color to ensure that mentoring programs are identity affirming for SGMY, culturally grounded, and incorporate critical mentoring approaches⁶⁷ for youth of color.

Related to many rural communities' desires to promote positive youth development and likely support of mentoring programs more broadly, one potential strategy to enhance mentor recruitment and engagement is the use of youth as mentors themselves. For example, as noted by Mandell,⁸⁹ youth who have experienced successful mentoring often later become successful mentors for others. Often a strength of rural community members is their strong desire to "give back" and work as a community to continue to survive/thrive.⁹⁰

Because of the lack of available mentoring programs as well as lack of volunteers,⁷⁷ rural settings often find they have to be innovative and partner with other programs/resources for support, sharing resources, and being purposeful. "Successful strategies will be more likely if supported by all segments of the community including interests such as the business community, health care, law enforcement, education, civic groups, faith-based organizations, and local politicians" (p. 24).²⁴ By collaborating with existing established programs, such as 4-H and FFA, youth can receive indirect mentoring while also advancing their connection to the community and serving community needs via these organizations' purposes.⁶¹ Further, the community itself can be a mentoring resource, as often rural settings foster strong feelings of pride and hope.⁸⁶

In conclusion, fully understanding the culture of individual rural communities (including the strengths and barriers of the community) is essential to successfully implementing youth mentoring initiatives and connecting youth with these programs. Further, recognizing that rural communities may be cautious about trusting outsiders points to the importance of relationship and collaboration skills as qualities that are essential to supporting the development of youth mentoring programs in rural areas. Increasing capacity of current programs is potentially the most ideal means of advancing mentoring for youth in rural settings, particularly programs that have a lengthy history and are deeply rooted within existing community structures.

CONCLUSIONS

1. There are examples of innovative means of supporting youth in rural settings, such as utilizing the outdoors and technology (e-mentoring) as well as incorporating local resources such as the youth culture and community into the program.
2. There is clear evidence that rural settings have supportive programming for youth that contains mentoring components, yet systematic information about how programs are nurturing high quality implementation and promoting long-term sustainability for youth in rural settings is lacking.
3. Given that research on best practices of mentor recruitment, program staffing, and other logistical methods is often individualized to a particular community, there is insufficient research to draw conclusions regarding best practices for adapting programs developed in urban settings for implementation in rural settings, or even from one rural setting to another.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

While the research detailed in the previous section gives our field some building blocks for understanding of the key practices and potential impact of mentoring for youth in rural communities, there is still much to learn about mentoring youth in rural settings. This research is urgently needed given that one in five Americans lives in a rural area. Clearly, there are large numbers of youth experiencing mentoring in rural settings, both in and outside of formal programs — a 2018 MENTOR study found that 11% of the nation's programmatic mentors and 12% of informal mentors indicated they lived in a rural area (Garringer & Benning, 2018). The small handful of studies examining their relationships, while valuable, constrains us in making stronger conclusions about what is effective in terms of rural-focused mentoring, especially in terms of formal programs.

One additional limitation not discussed much in the main review is that evaluations of programs that clearly serve large numbers of rural youth often do not cleanly break out findings for rural youth vs urban or suburban participants. A great example of this is the evaluation of the 4-H Mentoring/Youth and Families with Promise program (Poulin & Orchowsky, 2012), which examined youth outcomes (of which there were several), moderators of those outcomes, and implementation fidelity and challenges, but failed to note the percentage of youth in the study that were in rural sites in Utah versus those at more urban sites in Salt Lake City and Provo. Chances are a sizable percentage of the youth in that study were rural youth, but as the rural composition of the sample was not articulated, we were not able to include this meaningful study in the conclusions of this review. Also, many rural youth, particularly Native youth, are highly transient, often moving back and forth between residences in rural and urban/suburban settings. Clearly, more attention is needed in evaluating rural mentoring services and in researching the factors that make mentoring relationships function in the context of unique rural environments.

But, even though there is limited research, there are several things practitioners can consider when designing and implementing services. Here we focus on advice for practitioners looking to build new programming in rural areas, although many of these lessons may be helpful for programs that are already up and running, but looking to strengthen their services.

1. Be careful when adopting programs originally designed in urban contexts for rural settings.

While there are certain standards of practice that likely cut across any setting (e.g., *The Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*), many of the more prominent mentoring models we see in this field were originally developed for heavily-resourced urban environments. These programs may have elements — such as an activity curriculum that assumes easy access to a variety of community assets, or referrals of mentored youth to additional services and supports that are not readily available in rural areas — that may make importing them to rural contexts a real challenge. If adapting an urban program to a rural context, think carefully about the assets needed to facilitate program activities, the level of staffing needed in the model, and the assumptions made about what other services and supports youth have access to. Programs in rural areas may need both staff and mentors to wear multiple hats to fill roles that others may have covered when running the program in a city. This doesn't mean that rural providers can't build on the work of urban programs and borrow some of their best ideas. In fact, there are established frameworks for adapting evidence-based models to different settings that practitioners might find valuable in thinking about what should or can be changed when adapting an urban-designed program for a rural setting (for example, tip sheets [like this one](#) from the Department of Health and Human Services can be helpful). But the best rural mentoring services will always work with the community to design and refine their programming and make sure they...

2. Utilize and prioritize the assets that a rural setting can bring to mentoring work. As noted in many places in this review, America's rural communities have several strengths that can be major assets in

designing and operating a mentoring program:

- The natural setting of many rural communities lends itself to both a wealth of recreational and outdoors-based activities, as well as mentoring interactions that last for longer periods of time. While many urban matches often try to cram in a mentoring hour here and there in the hustle of participants' daily lives, life in rural areas may lend itself to longer periods of time together for mentors and youth, especially if mentors and youth share long car rides together getting to and from activities in remote settings. An afternoon spent fishing on a lake, with an additional hour or two driving there and back, affords a mentee a significant amount of time with their mentor and increased opportunities for building rapport, sharing information about each other, and bonding over a love of a special place in the natural world. This is a gift that many matches in urban settings never get. Now, it's also true that harsh winter conditions may make outdoor activity a challenge for many months in rural areas — leaving mentors and youth with limited options indoors. But generally speaking, the slower pace of life and ample access to outdoor activity is a major asset for rural mentoring efforts that can help maximize the time spent together.
- The somewhat homogeneous nature of life in many rural settings likely means that mentors and youth may have many more things in common than typical matches in urban contexts. Of course, rural communities are not completely lacking in diversity and are often growing more diverse over time, and many of these youth can feel particularly marginalized and isolated in rural communities. But youth and adults living in the same rural community likely have many things in common already based on the shared experience of living in an area with fewer changes happening and a greater shared understanding of what daily life looks like. This can offer a program greater flexibility in making matches based on common interests, as well as offering these relationships more common ground to start from as they begin the work of building a closer bond.
- As noted in the review, many rural communities build on these shared rural experiences by developing very strong cultures of community pride and an ethos that the community is bound to one another individually and committed to the shared success of the whole community. This sense of "this community looks out for one another" can be a major asset in mentor recruitment and in fostering the sense that mentoring young people is in service of the health of the entire community or region. It could even be said that the local pride and sense of community found in rural areas represents a "collectivist" mindset that is quite rare in our rather individualistic American culture, and mentoring programs may have an easier time getting broad support (in terms of volunteers, financial support, and in-kind donations) if they can tap into that sense of community pride and shared destiny. There is also the well-documented fear of a shrinking population in rural communities, and messages that connect mentoring and thriving youth to regional economic stability and reductions in young adult flight to the cities might be particularly powerful.

3. Anticipate and respond to the challenges that can come from the rural setting. In spite of these ample assets and cultural values that practitioners in rural communities can tap into, the reality is that delivering mentoring services in remote areas can be really challenging. Practitioners should think carefully about how they can overcome barriers such as:

- Limited volume of staffing (and perhaps limited staff skill sets) — The smaller population in rural areas may limit both the availability of staff and the skills that they bring to the program. Rural programs might benefit from simpler program designs that are less labor intensive on staff, the creative use of technology to automate some staff functions (e.g., match check-ins or mentor trainings delivered remotely rather than individually or in-person), and emphasizing redundancy and cross-training in staff positions so that if one staff member leaves, others are familiar enough with the work to be able to step in and keep the program functioning during what may be a long search for a replacement.
- Limited privacy and confidentiality — One of the unfortunate truths of life in a rural community is that, due to the slower pace of life and fewer things happening in the community, there can be a sense that "everyone knows everything about everyone." Confidentiality and privacy are often critical principles of mentoring programs, with a

youth's friends often being unaware that their classmate is getting extra help from a mentor and friends and families of volunteer mentors often knowing very little about the youth being mentored or what they do together. In a rural community, much of that anonymity may be out the window. The needs of a youth and their family may be widely (and unfairly) known, the engagement of youth and mentors in certain activities may not be very discreet, and there can even be judgement or gossip from others in the community about who is matched with whom and what they do together. Programs should offer extensive training for mentors on how to respect and maintain their mentee's confidentiality and privacy in these settings, as well as information about how to schedule match activities so that everything the match does together is not an open book. In addition to these match-level supports, the program would also be wise to provide copious communication to the community as a whole so that community members understand the purpose of the program and the need for respecting the confidentiality of matches and the work they are doing together.

- Limitations on that “shared” culture — Although, as noted above, the shared identity of many rural communities is a strength that programs can leverage, there are downsides to that monolithic definition and understanding of community that leave some youth and families feeling marginalized, if not outright judged and unwelcome. Many rural communities have seen significant shifts in demographics in recent years, with large numbers of seasonal or migrant workers, recent immigrants, or other “new” groups settling in rural communities. These new arrivals can often strain the shared sense of identity that many rural communities can have and, unfortunately, this can lead to the marginalization and minoritization referred to frequently in this review.

Mentoring practitioners can play a major role in addressing these community divisions, using the program itself to help overcome stereotypes and misconceptions, and helping community members build shared understanding and respect across differences. This is not easy work in rural communities, which, at least in the United States, may be defined by a distrust of outsiders, deeply conservative politics, and a fear of multiculturalism and the impact it may have on a deeply ingrained “way of life.” But while this can make a mentoring program’s work more difficult, it also presents an opportunity in which rural mentoring leaders can be major assets in helping rural communities respond positively to demographic shifts and in helping find common bonds between newly arrived families and those who have called a community home for many generations. Unfortunately, it is worth noting that there may be some rural communities where deeply ingrained values and biases may make them extremely resistant to these types of shifts and that programs seeking to have these conversations may even be viewed as threats to community cohesion. In these instances, practitioners can still find creative ways to offer youth a safe and supportive program environment (e.g., online approaches may be particularly salient in communities that are openly hostile to supporting certain youth, such as LGBTQ youth or immigrant youth).

4. Focus services on those who need support the most. As noted several times throughout this review, there are diverse community members within rural settings — racial and ethnic minorities, SGMY and LGBTQ+ populations, youth with disabilities, recent immigrants (or even just recent arrivals from other communities). These youth may be particularly struggling with feelings of belonging and identity in a community that may feel very different or very dismissive of their history or lived experience. These youth may face considerable marginalization, stigmatization, and discrimination in rural contexts and a mentor from that community who provides acceptance, understanding, and a sense of mattering and belonging may be particularly impactful for these young people. All rural youth can benefit from increased social capital and connections to others — in fact, having an adult mentor to help guide you to resources, assets, and new opportunities might be especially critical for rural youth, which is why e-mentoring holds such promise even in areas where the adult population has trouble filling that gap. But in every rural community, there is a subset of youth who are likely experiencing marginalization far more than others. Programs should consider ways in which mentoring relationships can not only offer direct support to these youth, but might also be a tool to fight bigotry, discrimination, and “othering” head on, helping a rural community that may be resistant

to change turn a corner in welcoming others and building a broader sense of community while still retaining that deep civic pride that often defines rural life in America.

There are additional challenges to developing and maintaining youth services in rural America that were not discussed much in the research literature: Transportation challenges, difficulty finding affordable liability insurance due to the nature of some mentor-youth activities, limited financial and human capital to draw from, just to name a few. The good news is that there is strong infrastructure available to support practitioner planning and professional development in rural communities. Many of MENTOR's Affiliates operate in states with considerable rural populations and their staff have often spent decades working with local communities to find solutions to their often-unique challenges. Those same Affiliates are responsible for providing the technical assistance available through the [National Mentoring Resource Center](#). Rural providers are encouraged to not only apply for technical assistance support, but to also use the networking capacities provided by these organizations to find other rural practitioners who have faced, and overcome, some of the same challenges. Improvements in technology-based professional development means that rural practitioners have access to a wealth of trainings, peer learning, and engagement opportunities. The National Mentoring Resource Center can be a major asset in improving the viability and quality of any rural mentoring effort and we encourage programs to take advantage of this federal support that brings expertise directly into those communities.

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