RESEARCH INSIGHTS FOR PRACTITIONERS

An NMRC E-Newsletter Focused on Mentoring Research and Research-Informed Tools for Program Improvement

Welcome to the third edition of the National Mentoring Research Center E-Newsletter! This newsletter focuses on mentoring research, the work of the NMRC Research Board, and emerging knowledge that can help you plan and implement more effective mentoring services for youth. In this issue, we:

- Feature reflections from Dr. Michelle Kaufman on her team's work to understand mentor-mentee conversations and their potential to help prevent youth substance use,
- Summarize some great new research articles produced by the members of our NMRC Research Board and other scholars,
- Offer information about the new season of the Reflections on Research podcast, and
- Share a Q&A from the 'Office Hours' session with NMRC Research Board Member, Dr. Amy Anderson, about Youth Participatory Action Research

Do you have a question about mentoring evaluation and research? Please write to rbennett@mentoring.org and we'll answer a few user-submitted questions in our next issue. Thanks for reading and look for more research-focused newsletters, in addition to our usual NMRC updates, in our next issue!

- Rachel Bennett, Research Manager at MENTOR

Third Edition
May 2023

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Preventing Youth Substance Use

Michelle R. Kaufman, PhD – NMRC Research Board Member

Back when I was a graduate student, I needed a reprieve from the lab-focused studies of my psychology department that seemed to have no real-world implication. I wanted to find something that would feed my soul. I decided to apply to be a Big Sister in the Nutmeg Big Brothers Big Sisters program in Connecticut. I soon found myself matched with an 11-year-old girl, guiding her on all the things mentors often find themselves addressing—family conflicts, friends, school challenges, self-esteem, etc. The girl's grandmother even asked me to talk with her about sex and pregnancy/STI prevention, as I was studying behavior change around these very issues as a doctoral student. I quickly found out that these more sensitive issues were best addressed in the car when my Little and I couldn't really look each other in the eye. She would open up the most when I wasn't face-to-face with her.

Fast forward about 5 years to the ubiquitous rise of text messages, smart phones, and social media. I had finished my graduate degrees, moved around for jobs, and settled into what is now my career in Baltimore. I also became connected with Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Greater Chesapeake, again connecting with a Little Sister who was 14-years old at the time. We talked about many of the issues I discussed with my first Little Sister. This time, all the most sensitive conversations—sex, STI symptoms, pregnancy scares, drug use, violence, mental health challenges—all happened via texts or DMs (direct messages) on social media apps.

These two experiences with Little Sisters inspired my dissertation work (Kaufman, 2010), and later a sizable grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse. The grant project, nearly at its end, involved finding a way to use technology and social media to help mentors talk about sensitive issues with mentees. Because Baltimore was reeling from the killing of Freddy Gray when I was writing the grant, I focused on discussion of sensitive issues with Black boys in Baltimore City, partnering with small, local mentoring programs. Eventually we expanded to include other genders and young people in other urban areas.

While the pandemic interrupted much of our work on that project, we did manage to do a series of in-depth interviews with mentors about how they discuss substance use with mentees, if at all. This research is currently under review at an academic journal, but I will provide the highlights here. My team, made up of a long-time mentoring program manager (Hey, Jeannette!), a research coordinator, and some eager students studying the impact of social factors on health, interviewed a total of 26 adults serving as mentors to African American youth ages 12-14 in formal mentoring programs in the Baltimore/Washington, DC area. We chose this youth age range because research shows addressing substance use before use is initiated (usually in the later teen years) is key for prevention of substance use disorders (Johnston et al., 2015; Lipari et al, 2014).

Little is known about the pathways through which mentoring can address and prevent unhealthy behaviors. While we are starting to see research about the mental health impacts

of mentoring, substance use is not a topic that is commonly addressed, either by mentoring programs or mentoring researchers. With young people, having conversations is a simple, possible prevention pathway.

Easier said than done, however. Parent-child communication about substance use is already difficult. Having a non-parental adult engage in such conversations is even more complicated, as such a topic is heavy with questions around mentor boundaries, personal experiences and knowledge, attitudes towards substance use, etc. Gizem Erdem (another NMRC Research Board Member) and I did a review of studies looking at the impact of mentoring on substance use back in 2020 (Erdem & Kaufman, 2020). Few focused on the communication between mentors and mentees, but one study did show that mentors who model acceptance, open communication, and who share their own personal experiences can encourage youth mentees to feel safe talking about the topic (Rubin et al., 2021).

To fill this gap in the research, my team spoke with mentors who had been mentoring an African American young person for at least a year. We heard a range of stories. Some mentors did not discuss substance use at all because the mentors did not want to cross an ambiguous boundary in their role. Other mentors reported they discuss the topic frequently because they know the youth with whom they work are going to be exposed to substances—using, selling, family/friends who are incarcerated because of it—in their lives soon if not already. The interviews revealed that mentors generally feel confident discussing substance use with mentees, but few do so.

Another key finding from our research was that these mentors to African American youth are not just concerned about their mentees using drugs, but they are concerned about them even being associated with it because of their increased potential for incarceration, particularly males. Several mentors we interviewed talked about how when they do have conversations, it's not just about avoiding drugs, it's about avoiding the criminal justice system and incarceration. These mentors stressed that for Black youth, particularly Black boys, talking about drugs means also talking about racial injustice and structural issues that put such young people at risk of very serious consequences beyond their individual health outcomes.

What is next for mentoring research on substance use? My team is now using these interviews to think about what training mentors need—and how technology can facilitate this—to have deep, meaningful conversations with youth. We are especially interested in how to better equip mentors to have

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these difficult, sensitive conversations, whether they be about drugs, sex, violence, or mental health challenges. If mentors are better equipped to talk about the tough topics, it is likely they will better equip young people to navigate these sensitive issues and to live healthier lives as adults. As a public health scholar, I am invested in reducing health disparities. Starting with young people who are most likely to experience disparities as adults may hold the most promise for a future that includes health equity. Youth mentoring has the potential to play a role in this endeavor.

If you want to learn more about our team's work in using mentoring to address health disparities, please contact Kate Wright, Research Associate, to be added to our quarterly e-newsletter mailing list. kwrigh41@jhu.edu

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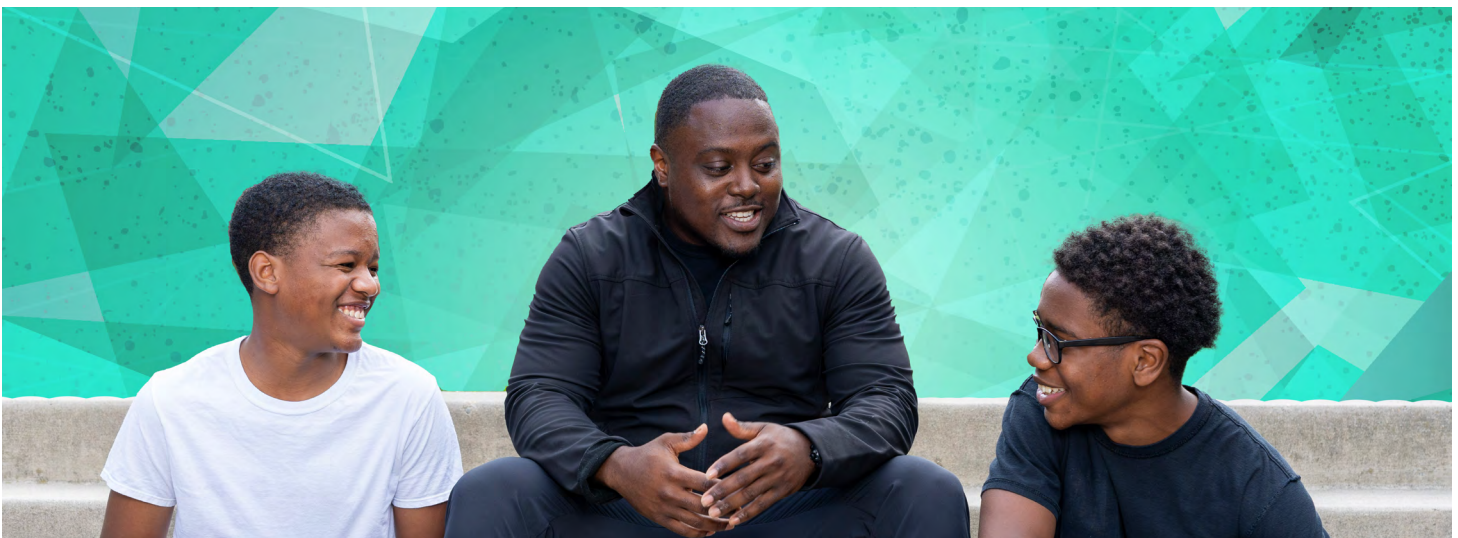
NEW RESEARCH OF INTEREST

Each quarter in this space, we'll highlight new(ish) research articles that might be of interest to those of you planning, running, and evaluating mentoring programs. Where these articles are publicly available, we have provided a link. For those that are not, you can likely get them through the journal collections of your local public library or any academic library you have access to. In most cases, article authors are also able to share single copies with folks who contact them. Please reach out to the NMRC if you have questions about how to access one of the articles mentioned below. NMRC Research Board members are noted in bold text and Associate Board members are noted in bold italics.

Do program practices matter for mentors?: How implementation of empirically supported program practices is associated with youth mentoring relationship quality

– by **Thomas E. Keller**, Alison L. Drew, **Carla Herrera**, Hyuny Clark-Shim, & **Renée Spencer**

This study investigates how the implementation of program-level practices by formal youth mentoring programs is associated with the quality of youth mentoring relationships as contexts for youth development and also examines whether this connection is mediated by the mentor-staff working alliance. Using data from mentors (n = 542) participating in multiple programs (n = 55), multilevel path models examined hypothesized direct and mediated effects. Parallel analyses were conducted with assessments of program practices from staff (n = 219). Greater exposure to program practices was associated with higher ratings of mentoring relationship satisfaction, commitment, and security and lower mentor-youth relationship negativity. The mentor-staff working alliance either partially or fully mediated these associations. Staff-reported practices predicted mentoring relationship satisfaction and commitment without mediation by the working alliance. This study suggests program practices contribute to stronger youth mentoring relationships. The findings also highlight the mentor-staff working alliance in supporting the development of positive mentoring relationships.

Relevance for practitioners: Using data from a multi-state sample of mentoring programs, this study sought to assess the impact of program practices on mentoring relationship quality, and to what extent, that may be linked to the working alliance between program staff and mentors. To examine implementation practices, randomized programs completed an assessment via the National Quality Mentoring System which integrates practice standards outlined in the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* (EEPM). Mentors with greater exposure to EEPM practices reported higher ratings of commitment to the mentoring relationship and overall satisfaction, as well as indicating having more supportive interactions with mentees. Similarly, program staff who reported implementation of multiple practice standards was linked to mentors' ratings of satisfaction and commitment to the mentoring relationship – both of which are presumed to contribute to match length. Mentors' report of program practices was strongly associated with ratings for the mentor-staff working alliance. Findings from this study align with other research which links the

implementation of evidence-informed practices with match length, mentor persistence and satisfaction. Program practices informed by empirical evidence offer mentoring organizations useful guideposts when considering efforts which will most contribute to strong matches. To help facilitate match outcomes like relationship quality, programs should consider how staff can contribute to forming positive working alliances with mentors.

Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.23019

Pathways by which case managers' match support influences youth mentoring outcomes: Testing the systemic model of youth mentoring

– by **Michael J. Karcher**, Daniel A. Sass, **Carla Herrera**, **David L. DuBois**, Janet Heubach, & Jean B. Grossman

Keller's systemic model of youth mentoring posits there are multiple pathways through which all stakeholders in the youth mentoring process, including the program staff who support the match (or case managers), influence youth outcomes. This study examines case managers' direct and indirect contributions to match outcomes and tests how transitive interactions facilitate a theorized sequence of mentoring interactions to effect greater closeness and length, specifically in nontargeted mentoring programs. A structural equations model of case manager contributions to match outcomes was tested using data from 758 mentor-mentee matches, supported by 73 case managers across seven mentoring agencies. Results reveal direct effects of mentor-reported match support quality on match length and indirect influences on match length through increasing youth-centeredness, goal-focused orientation, and closeness. The findings confirm the presence of multiple pathways of influence, including indirect effects on outcomes via transitive interactions in match support that scaffold youth-centeredness and goal-focused interactions in the match. Findings also suggest supervisors' evaluations of case managers may provide little information about how match support influences the nature of mentor–mentee interactions.

Relevance for practitioners: By taking a closer look at the interactions between case managers (i.e., program staff who oversee mentor-mentee matches) and mentors, this study sought to test how these interactions may contribute to outcomes such as match length and quality in community-based, one-to-one, nontargeted programs. While it may come as no surprise to practitioners that staff who exhibit strong supervisory skills are likely to contribute to matches that are closer, longer lasting, and overall, more successful, this study presents the field with recommendations on specific practices that can influence these outcomes when implemented. Of note, the authors found that match support from case managers indirectly contributed to match length by increasing youth-centeredness in mentor-mentee interactions. Match support quality was also shown to predict changes in youth-centeredness, which oriented matches to be more goal-focused and ultimately, have closer relationships. Although the authors emphasize that findings should be considered as preliminary due to the "relatively small magnitude" of most associations they found, these findings confirm that by simply demonstrating concern about match success and a willingness to support mentors by being available and providing helpful suggestions, case managers play an invaluable role influencing outcomes. Because youth-centeredness emerged as a key driver in match quality and length, case managers will benefit from training and professional development that integrates this approach into their own practice, as well as the training and ongoing supervision of mentors. To help assess case manager interactions and support of mentors, programs can provide regular opportunities for mentors to provide feedback via survey.

Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.23010

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Trajectories and impact of White mentors' beliefs about racial and ethnic discrimination in a formal youth mentoring program

– by **Savannah B. Simpson,** Ti Hsu, & Elizabeth B. Raposa

This study represents one of the more systematic examinations to date of the role that mentor racial bias plays in the quality and duration of mentoring relationships with young people, with a particular focus on the experiences of BIPOC youth and White mentors who are paired in programmatic mentoring relationships. This study examined the relationships of 290 White mentors in the College Mentors for Kids program whose mentees were randomly assigned to them — 64% were paired with a BIPOC youth. The study examined mentor baseline and post-program perceptions of the racial discrimination faced in America by different racial and ethnic groups. The study also examined whether baseline perceptions of racial discrimination predicted outcomes of the match, such as quality and duration. The study found that White mentors paired with BIPOC mentees were significantly more likely than their peers matched with White youth to increase their perception that racism in America holds back Black individuals, suggesting that the experience of working closely with youth and families of color tends to help White Americans understand more about the barriers faced by Black individuals. The study also found that, in general, mentors' awareness of racial discrimination, or lack of awareness, did not predict match quality or duration. However, there were a few instances in which mentor beliefs did impact match quality, particularly for White mentors paired with Black youth and whose awareness of discrimination increased. These mentors reported increased anxiety about their match, possibly because of reduced feelings of self-efficacy or because of negative feelings associated with their new awareness around racial discrimination.

Relevance for practitioners: One of the more common questions asked by mentoring programs is about the recommended practices for when and how to make cross-race matches in mentoring programs. While there is tremendous value in matching youth with credible messenger mentors who share some aspects of identity and experience with the mentee, there are other circumstances where those characteristics may not matter and the research on this, as the article notes, is very mixed. This study, while not offering clear answers, represents a very solid investigation into how the biases and understanding of racial discrimination in American society that mentors bring to programs can influence the course of the relationship and the experiences of youth and families who seek help from mentoring programs. The study highlights that the mentoring experience can be an educational one for White Americans, who here demonstrated increased awareness of the challenges facing Black families (specifically) when paired with BIPOC youth. This suggests mentoring can help bridge some divides and create greater cross-cultural understanding. Unfortunately, those same mentors who experienced growth in this way were more likely to report anxiety about their match, possibly from the feeling that they weren't making as much of a difference or perhaps feelings of guilt or despair about historical discrimination and their inability to address that in the present. One idea for programs to consider is to ask mentors to complete a simple test of racial bias or understanding as was used in this study. At the very least it can identify mentors with deeply problematic beliefs so that they can be screened out of volunteer positions. But it could also identify mentors who may be primed for growth based on who they are paired with and serve as a reminder to watch how their growing awareness may lead to anxiety or stress in the match.

Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12664

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Examining holistically the experiences of mentors in school-based programs: A logic analysis

– by Maria Vittoria Bufali, Graham Connelly, & Alec Morton

The article presents a Logic Analysis of the Scottish MCR ("Motivation, Commitment and Resilience") Pathways school-based mentoring scheme. MCR Pathways provides vulnerable secondary school students with one-to-one support, helping them realize their full potential through education. The perceptions of 12 mentors were explored through interviews, thematically analyzed and mapped to derive the program's Theory of Change as regards the volunteers themselves. This model was then assessed against the evidence base yielded from prior studies. The evaluation highlighted a mismatch between mentors' outcome expectations and what they actually gained from the experience. Furthermore, some themes (e.g., being driven by community concerns) turned out to be more prominent in the context of this specific scheme than in the wider literature, as opposed to other ones (e.g., developing friendships). The study generates insights into the ways to attract and retain growing numbers of volunteers, as well as to advance scientific knowledge.

Relevance for practitioners: Authors of this study conducted qualitative interviews with mentors to assess the impact mentoring had in their lives and compare findings to existing research. The interviews highlighted several domains relevant for program staff responsible for supporting and supervising mentors. Most mentors endorsed their initial pursuit of mentoring to be motivated by factors such as giving back to their community or a means by which to reflect their personal altruistic values. When asked to reflect on what they ultimately gained from their mentoring experience, however, mentors most frequently cited gaining a new awareness (e.g., deeper insights into themselves or others) as well as, into what fosters or prevents positive youth development. Mentors also noted that their relationship with their mentee made them more open-minded and provided an opportunity to sharpen communication and interpersonal skills. Findings from this study underscore the crucial importance of ongoing supervision and support for mentors, which may be especially impactful in the beginning stages of a new mentor-mentee relationship, as well as when matches experiences challenges. The authors outline recommendations for programs to consider as they recruit, train, and support mentors. Among these recommendations are setting realistic expectations of the mentoring relationship, normalizing that challenges are an inherent part of the mentoring experience, and providing structured opportunities for mentors to connect with one another for support when appropriate.

Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22991

Striking the balance: The relative benefits of goal- and youth-focused approaches to youth mentoring relationships

– by Alexandra Werntz, Cyanea Y. S. Poon, & Jean E. Rhodes

Targeted, goal-focused approaches to mentoring can improve behavioral and mental health outcomes than more recreational, non-specific approaches. However, a focus on goals needs to be balanced with openness to including mentees' preferences. This study builds on prior work by exploring the benefits of goal- and youth-focused approaches to mentoring relationships from the youth mentee's perspective, including their associations with relationship measures (closeness and tension) and mental health outcomes (i.e., conduct problems, emotional symptoms, and depressive symptoms). This study was a secondary analysis of data from 2165 youth participating in thirty nationally representative mentoring programs in the United States. On average, youth were 12.3-years-old (SD = 1.43, range = 9–16) and the majority were female (55%); 36.7% were Black/African American, 22.4% were White, and 23.5% were Latino/Hispanic. Path analyses revealed 1) youth- and goal-focused approaches were positively associated with closeness, 2) youth-focused approaches were negatively associated with tension, 3) goal-focused approaches were positively associated with tension. At follow-up, a stronger mentoring relationship (less tension and greater closeness) was related to positive youth outcomes. As the field of mentoring corrects for an overemphasis on intuitive approaches and moves towards more targeted directions, it should resist veering too far from what sets the field apart from skills-training models: the role of a caring relationship.

Relevance for practitioners: Analyzing responses from a large sample of youth participating in various mentoring programs (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 4-H, and the Police Activities League), this study aimed to learn what youth report are the effects of participating in targeted and non-targeted programs. Higher perceptions of closeness were associated with both goal-focused and nontargeted programs, which was related to lower reports of emotional and depressive symptoms. Although both approaches showed strong associations with closeness, youth in stronger goal-focused programs reported higher rates of relational tension with their mentor. Though experiencing tension when working with young people to set and achieve goals can naturally create challenges, the authors highlight the importance of employing strategies to mitigate these tensions while still aiming to achieve close relationships *and* goal-focused outcomes. These findings highlight the potential for mentoring to foster outcomes like improving psychological wellbeing, while emphasizing the unique and necessary role of relationships as a conduit for these outcomes.

Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-023-01751-4

RECENT RESEARCH BOARD PUBLICATIONS AND TOOLS

New Season of *Reflections on Research* Podcast! – We are happy to announce that the first two episodes of Season 4 of our *Reflections on Research* podcast are now up on the NMRC website! These podcasts now feature video, as well, and center on interviews with leading mentoring researchers about their work. Each episode is only about 25 minutes, making it perfect for a commute or a fun little break in your day. So, join MENTOR's Mike Garringer as he interviews a rotating cast of scholars and thought leaders about key issues and new research in youth mentoring!

> **Season 4 Episode 1 - Dr. Grace Gowdy:** Dr. Gowdy joined the podcast for a lively conversation about social capital and how mentors can help youth expand their webs of support and open up new possibilities and connections.
>
> **Season 4 Episode 2 - Dr. Kristian Jones:** In this episode, we explore the mentoring experiences of Black youth, the impact of being a mentor to a BIPOC youth on White mentors, and the keys to bridging cultural differences in mentoring relationships with Dr. Kristian Jones of the University of Washington.
>
> ***Available at:*** https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/research-tools/reflections-on-research-podcast/

ASK A RESEARCHER!

Each issue, we'll end the newsletter by answering a question that was sent to us or brought up in one of our NMRC Office Hours sessions. Today's question was asked in the March Office Hours session with Dr. Amy Anderson.

Q: What is Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and what are some ways that mentoring programs can incorporate this approach into their work? Do you have suggestions for implementing this kind of approach for programs that may not have as much direct access to youth?

Dr. Anderson:

What is YPAR? Youth voice initiatives aim to disrupt power imbalances between youth and adults within organizations by bringing youth perspectives to the forefront. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is one approach to youth voice where adults engage youth in research that is aimed at transforming organizations and communities. Youth are often viewed in society as not knowing enough to adequately develop answers to programmatic or community problems. However, YPAR is grounded in the idea that youth not only can conduct research in a sufficient way, but they tap into the world and the lives of other youth in ways that adults cannot.

In YPAR, adults get the ball rolling by bringing youth together to explore an issue that is impacting youth's lives. Youth then make decisions alongside adults about what issue they want to research, how they want to study it, and what the results mean for changing policies or settings.

How can YPAR be implemented? There is not one prescribed way to do YPAR because youth and settings vary widely. Rather, it is a flexible way of relating to youth that affirms their capabilities to promote change. Adults leverage their access within organizations to set an initial structure in which youths' research ideas can become a reality. For programs that directly work with youth, this could include integrating YPAR into group mentoring sessions, inviting a subset of youth participants to additional events, or engaging an existing youth advisory board.

For example, staff at a college-transition program for high school juniors gain stakeholder support to use a portion of weekly mentoring sessions this semester for YPAR. During initial sessions, youth discuss issues that are important to them and choose to explore mental health concerns following COVID-19 among program youth and other youth at their school. Youth develop a series of questions and identify social media as the best way to get peer feedback. During the mentoring sessions, youth make sense of the data alongside adult support. Youth determine that there are few school counselors and would like to advocate to school administration for more resources in this area. Adults support youth plans to share the findings with school and program stakeholders.

How can YPAR be done by programs without direct access to youth? Programs without direct access to youth may consider other ways to support YPAR. Organizations that provide guidance to direct service affiliates can review their practices to be in support of YPAR or other youth voice initiates (e.g., youth advisory board). For instance, there may

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be ways to include a youth voice as a requirement in program evaluations. If applicable, organizations can allocate funding to affiliate agencies who work directly with youth. Costs of YPAR often include youth compensation, payment for researcher participant incentives, food, or other project related costs. Ultimately, organizations can center youth perspectives in their practices and interactions with other direct-service organizations.

References & Resources

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Development & Training Opportunities

- **Does Your Program Need a 'Tune-Up'?**

  OJJDP Mentoring Grantees are invited to participate in this special opportunity to connect with a scholar from the NMRC Research Board to get advice around your program model, theory of change, and other aspects of your program's implementation and evaluation. Program tune-ups will give you a chance to collaboratively identify strengths of your program and areas where you'd like to grow.

  Tune-ups will involve two 1-hour meetings with a Board Member to review information about your program and to offer research-based guidance on opportunities for strengthening your services. **Any organization with an active OJJDP mentoring grant is invited to participate in this opportunity**.

  Write to Rachel Bennett at RBennett@mentoring.org with questions or to get your program in the queue for a tune-up!

- **Free Webinar! Taking a Trauma-Informed Approach to Mentoring Justice-Involved Youth**

  05/23/2023 at 1 - 2:15 PM ET

  Despite its rewards, mentoring justice involved youth can be challenging. As much as two-thirds of justice-involved youths have experienced multiple traumatic events and are likely to exhibit survival mode coping strategies. They can appear defiant, unmotivated, and reluctant to engage in mentoring relationships. This webinar addresses trauma-informed and supportive approaches to mentoring juvenile justice-involved youth. A panel discussion with three mentoring organizations servicing justice-involved youth in various settings will highlight how organization and system leaders can foster strong mentoring relationships amidst the challenges and systemic barriers that shape lives of justice-involved youths. Register Here!