

Forgotten Youth: The Need for Youth Mentoring in Rural Populations

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The term “mentoring” refers to a relationship process in which professional, emotional, or academic support is provided by a “senior” person to a more “junior” person. It can be a positive experience for people at every level of the enterprise. At its best, well-designed mentoring can lead to new relationships and help develop creativity and confidence. Youth mentoring services have demonstrated effectiveness at providing much-needed support to at-risk youth with overwhelmingly positive outcomes. Yet, despite the growing number of youth mentoring programs in the United States, there is a marked lack in rural areas. This lack of services is particularly evident in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Tolan et al., 2008).

Youth mentoring programs as an intervention to thwart juvenile delinquency reform began appearing in the United States more than a century ago (DuBois & Karcher, 2013). Since that time, and especially within the past two decades, the country has seen a proliferation of youth mentoring programs. The most well-known youth mentoring program, Big Brothers Big Sisters, inspired many similar programs that have had success in offering youth both emotional and physical protection as they navigate challenging and traumatic upbringings. Most often, youth mentoring programs exist in areas where youth are exposed to adverse childhood experiences (Murphy et al., 2014), including poverty, community and family violence, neglect, and food insecurity.

EXEMPLARY YOUTH MENTORING PROGRAMS

Several mentoring programs focus on pairing a mentor with a youth involved in the foster care system to provide additional support in a less formal setting than individual psychotherapy. One program, the First Star Academy, with locations af-

filiated with various universities spread throughout the country, pairs mentors with youth involved in foster care who are at risk of dropping out of school. The First Star Academy provides long-term support to youth throughout high school with the hope of supporting academic achievement and postsecondary educational pursuits. The First Star Academy not only supports young people academically, but also provides a caring and nurturing mentoring environment that helps young people thrive (Wesley et al., 2020). Fortunately, the results from the success of programs like the First Star Academy are also noted in other programs, including Big Brothers Big Sisters and Help One Student to Succeed (DuBois & Karcher, 2013).

MOVEMENT TOWARD MEASUREMENT

Measuring the effectiveness of youth mentoring programs has caught the attention of social and behavioral scientists. Important to consider when discussing the efficacy of youth mentoring programs is that the effectiveness of such programs must be viewed in two different levels of measurement: at the program level, and at the dyadic or relationship level (Spencer et al., 2020). Programmatic effectiveness of youth mentoring programs is most often assessed via pre- and posttest measures related to retention, the number of mentoring matches, mentor satisfaction, and allocated funding.

At the relationship level, youth mentoring is most successful when the mentor and mentee are similar in terms of racioethnic background as well as when the relationship is characterized as empathic, consistent, and emotionally close (Spencer et al., 2020). While measures of success differ according to program and location, youth mentoring has demonstrated critical importance to youth development. Across youth mentoring modalities,

rigorous research has noted that youth involved in mentoring relationships, as compared with their nonmentored counterparts, have a decreased likelihood of substance dependency, gang involvement, homelessness, truancy, and, at the most sobering level, death (DuBois & Karcher, 2013). Viewed from a more positive valence, youth mentoring programs improve youths' socioemotional, cognitive, and identity development (Spencer et al., 2020).

PROVINCIAL PAUCITY: THE GEOGRAPHIC GAP IN PROVISION OF RESOURCES

Even beyond youth who are at-risk, youth mentoring stands to benefit every child and young adult through the provision of a nonparental adult who can act as a guide during some of life's most challenging developmental periods (Wesley et al., 2020). Nonetheless, there is a considerable gap that exists in terms of how youth mentoring services are offered. Only 10 percent of the United States' youth mentoring programs exist in rural areas (Garringer et al., 2017). What makes this statistic particularly disturbing is that youth in rural areas experience many of the same problems as youth in urban settings, particularly related to exposure to family violence. In addition, rural communities have the highest rates of intimate partner and domestic violence: 22.5 percent as compared with 15.5 percent for urban couples (Holt et al., 2008). Due to small towns being more isolated from social service agencies and generally having less access to social supports, violence and child abuse and neglect have reached staggering proportions.

Even prior to the COVID-19 crisis, isolation in rural communities has been a real problem for young people. According to youth mentoring expert Kathryn Eustis, director of youth development and prevention programs in Calaveras, California:

Isolation for vulnerable rural youth is literal, not figurative. Our kids often live miles away from their neighbors and are literally stuck at home, often with nothing to do but watch TV and play video games. (Garringer, 2014, p. 1)

Eustis asserts that youth mentoring in rural communities can have a positive impact on unifying communities as youth mentors bridge the divide

between affluent and low-income families, dispelling myths and stereotypes about low-income families and demonstrating compassion that unites youth and adults alike. Several years ago, the renowned Youth Collaboratory (n.d.) sought to address the gap in the provision of youth mentoring to rural areas by creating toolkits for rural youth mentoring programs. Despite the Youth Collaboratory's efforts at making mentoring programs accessible and attainable in rural areas, there remains a paucity of youth mentoring programming in rural settings due to the widespread lack of funding and lack of volunteers.

CALL FOR SOCIAL WORKER ATTENTION

Especially considering that so many urban youth mentoring programs are bolstered by environments in which access to programming and program activity options abound, it is challenging to discern how to enable and empower programming in rural areas. Following the social work axiom of "starting where the client is," and coming to understand the resources available to small communities, seems a logical place to begin. While in urban environments it may be the case that numerous volunteers from all backgrounds are interested in becoming youth mentors, rural communities may need to look to local teachers, firefighters, sheriffs, or small-business owners to fill the roles of youth mentors. Beyond this, and especially in the context of a global pandemic, utilizing online mentoring services by reserving local libraries with computer access for even weekly e-mentoring sessions may be beneficial.

Much of social work's emphasis lies in providing aid and support to those living in urban areas, largely due to population density and because social workers' attention is constantly directed to these urban areas by the media. It is essential to adopt a more inclusive lens when working to improve the conditions of young people living in every setting and location. Specific mentoring strategies must take in account that:

- Rural areas are diverse, not monolithic. Just as every city has its own flavor, so does every rural area.
- Specific economic, social, health, or geographic conditions may drive the tenor of the strategy.

- Technology, while necessary, is not a panacea for mentoring in rural areas. Certain emotions simply cannot be communicated as effectively online as they can in person.
- The robust research conducted by youth mentoring scholars must include rural areas.

CONCLUSION

Social workers and service providers must broaden the scope of their practice and research to include rural areas, to bridge the gap in equity of youth mentoring services, and work to uphold the core social work values of service and social justice in seeking to protect young people in rural areas and provide the same safeguarding opportunities for youth across the country. **HSW**

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