

Summary of the Systematic Review

Effects on Mentoring Interventions in Reducing Crime

Authors and report:

P. Tolan, D. Henry, M. Schoeny, A. Bass: Mentoring Interventions to Affect Juvenile Delinquency and Associated Problems, Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2008:16
<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/>

This summary is completely based on the referred report, although the text is slightly edited.

Background

In recent years, mentoring has drawn substantial interest from policymakers, intervention theorists, and those interested in identifying promising and useful evidence-based approaches to interventions for criminal justice and child welfare outcomes. Mentoring is one of the most commonly-used interventions to prevent, divert, and remediate youth engaged in, or thought to be at risk for, delinquent behavior, school failure, aggression, or other antisocial behavior also in the criminal justice context. In this setting mentoring is usually intended to be a method of both reducing reoffending and increasing positive life outcomes such as greater levels of education, training and employment. Definitions of mentoring vary, but there are common elements. For the purpose of this review, mentoring was defined by the following 4 characteristics: 1) interaction between two individuals over an extended period of time, 2) inequality of experience, knowledge, or power between the mentor and mentee (recipient), with the mentor possessing the greater share, 3) the mentee is in a position to imitate and benefit from the knowledge, skill, ability, or experience of the mentor, 4) the absence of the role inequality that typifies other helping relationships and is marked by professional training, certification, or predetermined status differences such as parent-child or teacher-student relationships.

Research Methods

There have been a number of evaluations of the impact of mentoring on later life outcomes, but many of these have been based on limited research designs such as case studies, small-scale qualitative studies and evaluations which did not use a control group or comparison group. These studies have a limited ability to estimate the impact of mentoring on reoffending.

A total of 39 topic and methodologically eligible studies were identified for inclusion in the meta-analysis (out of 112 outcome reports) on delinquency, aggression, drug use, and academic achievement, which are each associated consistently with delinquency involvement or risk for such. A rapid evidence assessment, which is a rigorous method for

locating, appraising and synthesising evidence from previous studies, was used to assess the impact of mentoring on reoffending. The main benefit of a rapid evidence assessment is that it produces results much more quickly than a full systematic review. However, because of the restricted time period, certain material (e.g. unpublished research, foreign language studies, studies that were difficult to obtain) was not included. This might bias the results of this study, especially because significant results are more likely to be published (i.e. that mentoring has a beneficial influence on offending). A set of criteria for including and excluding studies in the review were developed. The search for relevant studies involved a number of strategies, which led to the identification of 49 potentially relevant studies, of which 48 were obtained. These included 18 comparisons of mentored and control groups that met the predefined criteria and were analysed.

Results

112 studies were identified as meeting inclusion criteria as focused on delinquency and mentoring. Of these, 39 met the additional criteria for inclusion in the quantitative analyses. 22 were randomized controlled trials and 17 were quasi-experimental studies involving non-random assignment, but with matched comparison groups as was described above. Twenty studies reported delinquency outcomes, 19 reported academic achievement outcomes, 6 reported drug use outcomes, and 6 reported aggression outcomes. Main effects sizes were positive and statistically significant for all four outcomes, though some studies showed zero or negative effects. The results suggested that mentoring reduced reoffending by about 4 to 10 per cent, but this benefit was mainly produced by the studies of lower methodological quality. High quality evaluations designed to provide the most accurate assessment of the impact of mentoring did not find that mentoring had an appreciable beneficial effect on reoffending.

However, there was evidence to suggest that some mentoring programs were more successful than others. Importantly, those in which the mentor and mentee spent more time together per meeting (5 hours or more) and met at least weekly were more successful in reducing reoffending. Interestingly, mentoring programs that had a longer duration (total time period) were not more effective than shorter programs, possibly because of the difficulty in continuing to recruit high quality mentors, or because mentoring continues for longer periods with more antisocial youths. Also, mentoring only had a beneficial influence on reoffending when it was given as part of a larger set of interventions. Mentoring along with employment, education and drawing up contracts of acceptable behavior was the most effective according to this review. Mentoring as a stand-alone intervention did not reduce reoffending. There was some indication that mentoring worked best when it was applied to those who had been apprehended by the police, as opposed to those who were at risk because of personal or social circumstances, or those who were convicted or imprisoned. The review generally supports the use of mentoring as a method of reducing reoffending, but the evidence is not totally convincing. There was no evidence to suggest that mentoring had any harmful effects in increasing reoffending. The review indicates what features should be included in successful mentoring programs. First, mentors and mentees should meet at least weekly for several hours at a time. Second, mentoring should be given as a part of a larger set of interventions. Third, mentoring should be used especially with persons who have been

apprehended by the police. Existing evidence suggests that mentoring might be a valuable component of intervention programs with persons.

Conclusions

This analysis of 39 studies on four outcomes measuring delinquency or closely related outcomes suggests mentoring for high-risk youth has a modest positive effect for delinquency, aggression, drug use, and achievement. However, the effect sizes varied by outcome with larger effects for delinquency and aggression than for drug use and achievement. Also, effect sizes varied more for delinquency and aggression than for drug use or academic achievement. Effects tended to be stronger when emotional support was a key process in mentoring interventions, and when professional development was an explicit motive for participation of the mentors. While these findings support viewing mentoring as a useful approach for intervention to lessen delinquency risk or involvement, due to limited description of content of mentoring programs and substantial variation in what is included as part of mentoring efforts detracts from that view. The valuable features and most promising approaches can not be stated with any certainty. In fact, there is a remarkable lack of description of key features or basic program organization that is typically provided in empirical reports of effects with not much increase in quality of reports over the time period studied here. Given the popularity of this approach, the promise of benefits should be seen as a strong argument for a concerted effort through quality randomized trials to specify the theoretical and practical components for effective mentoring with high-risk youth.

Literature references (Selection)

The analysis includes also the statistical worksheet and survey, a list of studies as well as other publications from different authors.