



OJJDP-FUNDED RESEARCH IN BRIEF

Evaluation of the Effects of a Mentoring Program for Youth in Foster Care on Their Criminal Justice Involvement as Young Adults

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The evaluation of the “My Life” mentoring program for youth in foster care found less criminal offending in early adulthood among male participants.

Research Overview

This study examined the long-term effects of the *My Life* mentoring program on criminal offending in early adulthood for youth in foster care. The *My Life* model uses weekly structured individual and group mentoring activities for 16- to 18-year-old youth in foster care to improve their self-determination skills to help them meet their goals. For example, mentors help youth choose personal goals that are important to them, identify the steps to accomplish these goals, and use problem-solving strategies to manage obstacles along the way. This study extended the follow-up period of two previous randomized trials to examine whether the 12-month mentoring program had an impact on criminal offending and justice system involvement 2 years after program participation.

Research Design

This study analyzed previously collected data from two randomized controlled trials of the *My Life* mentoring model for foster youth ($N=293$) and added follow-up assessment of criminal justice outcomes at 2 years post-intervention (ages 19 to 21). Criminal justice involvement measures included self-reported past-year arrests and convictions, days incarcerated or on probation, and two self-report offending scales. Moderation analysis explored differences in intervention effectiveness by gender, identified disability, and prior delinquency.

Additionally, the research team analyzed intervention cost-effectiveness and costs versus benefits for preventing criminal justice outcomes. Youth participating in the *My Life* program received an average of about 100 direct mentoring and indirect service hours over the course of 1 year. Researchers used this average to estimate per-youth

Source: Blakeslee, J.E., and Keller, T.E. 2018. “Extending a randomized trial of mentoring for youth in foster care to evaluate long-term effects on delinquency in young adulthood.” Final report for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, grant number 2013-JU-FX-0001. NCJ 251418, available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/251418.pdf>

program costs compared to the benefits of preventing incarceration in young adulthood.

Research Findings

Overall, 15.2 percent of the youth in the study had past-year criminal justice involvement when measured at ages 19 to 21 ($N=154$). Criminal justice involvement was twice as high for those who did not participate in the mentoring program (19.3 percent) versus the mentored group (10.7 percent). This difference did not reach a level of statistical significance ($p=.099$).

However, there were statistically significant findings for subgroups within the population.

Among males, 29.3 percent of those in the control group had past-year criminal justice involvement at the 2-year follow-up versus 6.6 percent of the mentored group, a difference that was statistically significant ($p=.014$). Nonmentored males were more likely to have been incarcerated (8.4 percent) versus the mentored males (1.4 percent) ($p=.047$).

Researchers also observed a program effect on criminal justice involvement among participants who were not receiving developmental disability services at the time of mentoring. Twice as many youth in the control group reported criminal justice involvement at follow-up compared to the mentored group (24.2 percent versus 10.9 percent) ($p=.050$). However, mentoring did not reduce criminal justice involvement among youth who were receiving developmental disability services at baseline who also had lower rates of criminal justice involvement overall.

Lastly, there was a preventive effect among youth who had no prior delinquency when they started the program—none of the mentored youth in this group reported having been incarcerated at the 2-year follow-up. In contrast, 8.5 percent of the nonmentored youth who had no prior delinquency at baseline reported having been incarcerated at follow-up ($p=.027$).

The cost-benefit analysis showed that it cost three times as much to incarcerate the youth in the nonmentored group who later reported having been incarcerated in young adulthood, compared to what it would have cost to mentor them using the *My Life* program model 2 years earlier while they were in high school.

Policy/Practice Implications

The effects of the *My Life* program on offending in early adulthood narrowly missed levels of statistical significance for the overall sample. However, the program did result in statistically significant reductions in levels of offending and rates of incarceration among males. Evidence of program effectiveness with males is important because males were more likely to report criminal justice involvement at follow-up, overall, compared to females in the study.

The findings of this study suggest that a structured, weekly mentoring program specifically for foster care youth may reduce and prevent offending in early adulthood. These results have implications for child welfare policy and practice because many youth in foster care are also involved in the juvenile justice system and are at risk for future offending.

Moreover, the cost analysis suggests that the intensive mentoring programming offered in the *My Life* model, which requires investment in both staffing resources and program infrastructure to deliver as intended, may nonetheless be a cost-effective approach to prevent justice system involvement in early adulthood.

Resources

- **Full Research Report:**
<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/251418.pdf>
- **Description of the *My Life* model**
<http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/my-life/>