

Anne Hobbs

University of Nebraska Omaha, United States of America

ahobbs@unomaha.edu

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7913-5909>

Marta Dzieniszewska

University of Białystok, Poland

m.dzieniszewska@uwb.edu.pl

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6842-1918>

The Juvenile Reentry Mentoring Project: Adaptations During COVID-19

Abstract: Delinquent youths often do not receive the opportunity to be mentored. This is especially true for youths who have committed serious law violations or are detained for multiple law violations. In the United States, youths with the most serious offenses are often committed to detention, or rehabilitation, or treatment centers. Since 2011, the Juvenile Reentry Mentoring Project (JRMP) has matched mentors to youths detained in Nebraska Detention, and Treatment Facilities. The Nebraska Youth Rehabilitation, and Treatment Centers (YRTCs), specifically, are for youths with the highest level of needs and who have exhausted all other programs available in the community. From 2011 through February 2020, the JRMP developed as an evidence informed model for mentoring juveniles with the highest level of need and the most serious law violations. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted youths in detention and treatment centers, and mentoring programs such as the JRMP adapted to continue to meet existing and emerging needs of youths. The aim of this article is to report on the evidence-based development of the JRMP and the adaptations that were necessary for it to continue to operate during COVID-19. We close with recommendations and lessons learned from the pandemic and ways that programs can resist a return to the status quo.

Keywords: COVID-19, evidence-based, juvenile justice, mentoring

Introduction

In the United States, individual states spend approximately 5.7 billion dollars annually to detain youths in facilities outside of their community, many of which could be managed more effectively and with fewer commitments if detained within their own communities.¹ Commitments account for a large number of all detention admissions, and high-risk youths are disproportionately represented in these commitment statistics. A “high-risk youth” population refers to youths with intersecting needs, including emotional and behavioral problems, substance use, violence, and detachment from school.² Due to these constraints, youths may also be involved with intersecting systems of care, such as juvenile justice, child welfare, mental health, substance use, and special education programming. Furthermore, in the U.S., high-risk youths often belong to at least one minority group (e.g., racial/ethnic, sexual orientation, special education, socio-economic status, gender).³

In systemic terms, high-risk youths encounter more struggles within their social-ecological system, particularly living in violent environments, with family dysfunction, and a lack of supervision and support.⁴ Importantly, these youths are not usually involved in positive social activities (e.g., mentoring programs, school clubs, sports teams, or private clubs like scouts), further limiting their access to positive adult models and support.⁵ This is especially so for youths detained in juvenile facilities or rehabilitation centers. Many of these youths have a mental health diagnosis⁶ and have had prior exposure to violence in their homes, schools, or communities.⁷ Detained youths often have a history of complex trauma including: poly-victimization (*i.e.*, experiencing multiple types of trauma and victimization),

1 B. Holman, J. Ziedenberg, The dangers of detention: The impact of incarcerating youth in detention and other secure facilities. Justice Policy Institute, http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/dangers_of_detention.pdf (10.12.2020).

2 E.R. Frankford, Changing service systems for highest-risk youth using state-level strategies, “American Journal of Public Health” 2007, no. 97(4), p. 594, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2006.096347> (21.05.2021).

3 M.H. Swahn, R.M. Bossarte, Assessing and quantifying high risk: Comparing risky behaviors by youth in an urban, disadvantaged community with nationally representative youth, “Public Health Reports” 2009, no. 124(2), pp. 224–233.

4 E.R. Frankford, Changing service..., *op. cit.*, p. 594 and next.

5 S. Bauldry, T.A. Hartmann, The promise and challenge of mentoring high-risk youth: Findings from the national faith-based initiative, Public/Private Ventures, <https://www.aecf.org/resources/the-promise-and-challenge-of-mentoring-high-risk-youth> (21.06.2021).

6 B. Holman, J. Ziedenberg, The dangers..., *op. cit.*, http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/dangers_of_detention.pdf (10.12.2020).

7 D. Finkelhor, H. Turner, R. Ormrod, S. Hamby, K. Kracke, National survey of children’s exposure to violence. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/227744.pdf> (12.01.2021).

multiple out of home placements, and disruptions in relationships⁸. These forms of maltreatment coupled with violent modeling and disengagement from positive youth activities have culminated in social maladjustment and attachment problems for most of the youths committed to a YRTC.

1. Mentoring Efforts to Reduce High-risk Youth Recidivism

Overall, interventions for high-risk youths that focus on enhancing protective factors and creating supportive relationships, like mentoring, have been found to be more effective than programming aimed at surveillance like drug testing or electronic monitoring.⁹ While mentoring high-risk youths used to be somewhat uncommon, it has increased in recent years, as a low-cost strategy to increase emotional support, improve social skills¹⁰, and as a mechanism to impact delinquency and recidivism outcomes.¹¹ In the U.S., the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has devoted millions of dollars to increasing mentors available to prevent delinquency. This has led to an increase in community-based mentoring of high-risk youths, specifically aimed at reducing juvenile delinquency and recidivism.¹²

Research on mentoring high risk populations has been mixed. While some studies have found the effect size for mentoring interventions is relatively small, meta-analyses have documented promising gains for more than three million youths involved with mentoring in some capacity. The modest effect sizes are largely dependent on the quality of implementation.¹³ With relatively few programs designed for this population, the University of Nebraska's Juvenile Justice Institute set out to create a high-quality mentoring program specifically designed for youths in detention or rehabilitation centers. The Juvenile Reentry Mentoring Project (JRMP)

8 J.D. Ford, D.J. Grasso, J. Hawke, J.F. Chapman, Poly-victimization among juvenile justice-involved youths, "Child Abuse & Neglect" 2013, no. 37(10), p. 788 and next, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2013.01.005> (10.12.2020).

9 L.S. Abrams, S.M. Snyder, Youth offender..., *op. cit.*, p. 1787 and next, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.07.023> (21.06.2021).

10 S. Bauldry, T. A. Hartmann, The promise..., *op. cit.*, <https://www.aecf.org/resources/the-promise-and-challenge-of-mentoring-high-risk-youth> (21.06.2021).

11 J.A. Bouffard, K.J. Bergseth, The impact of reentry services on juvenile offenders' recidivism, "Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice" 2008, no. 6(3), p. 295 and next.

12 L.S. Abrams, S.M. Snyder, Youth offender reentry: Models for intervention and directions for future inquiry, "Children and Youth Services Review" 2010, no. 32(12), p. 1787 and next, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.07.023> (22.06.2021).

13 E.B. Raposa, J. Rhodes, G.J.J. M. Stams, N. Card, S. Burton, S. Schwartz, L.A.Y. Sykes, S. Kanchewa, J. Kupersmidt, S. Hussain, The effects of youth mentoring programs: A meta-analysis of outcome studies, "Journal of Youth and Adolescence" 2019, no. 48, p. 423 and next, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-00982-8> (22.06.2021).

utilized the six core standards of practice developed by MENTOR, an organization dedicated to mentoring practice standards and decades of research.¹⁴

Various mentoring programs and models outline practices and strategies for engaging youths, but establishing long-term relationships with high-risk youths poses unique challenges. Best practices generally facilitate longer matches, and longer mentor-mentee matches have been associated with better outcomes for youths.¹⁵ When unpacking match length, research has suggested that longer relationships result when the relationship is more natural (*i.e.*, does not feel contrived)¹⁶ and is characterized by a higher degree of ‘chemistry’ and connectedness.¹⁷

2. Theoretical Elements

Schwartz *et al.* (2013) designed the Youth Initiated Mentoring (YIM) model to include longer mentor-mentee matches. The YIM model has reported higher levels of reported satisfaction and better outcomes in education and social skills. Research indicates that because youths select their own mentors from pre-existing relationships, this increases levels of satisfaction among both mentors and mentees. Furthermore, many mentors have similar backgrounds to the youths (*e.g.*, are from the same community or of the same cultural background), allowing for matches to be built upon shared interests and assisting the pair to access resources and engage more in community activities. Other strengths of YIM include strong program retention, greater access to community resources, and lower costs for mentoring recruitment¹⁸.

Because it is sometimes difficult to match high-risk youths, some researchers projected that the YIM model would increase the number of adult mentors who are comfortable and confident to work with high-risk youths. The aim of having a surplus of mentors is for mentoring agencies to reduce waiting lists, and have mentors begin to serve the youths quickly and competently immediately following

14 M. Garringer, J. Kupersmidt, J. Rhodes, R. Stelter, T. Tai, Elements of effective practice for mentoring 4th edition, https://www.mentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Final_Elements_Publication_Fourth-2.pdf (22.06.2021).

15 J. Rhodes, B. Liang, R. Spencer, First do no harm: Ethical principles for youth mentoring relationships, “Professional Psychology: Research and Practice” 2009, no. 40(5), p. 452 and next.

16 E.A. Blechman, A. Maurice, B. Bucker, C. Helberg, Can mentoring or skill training reduce recidivism? Observational study with propensity analysis, “Prevention Science” 2000, no. 1(3), p. 139 and next.

17 D. Hagner, J.M. Molloy, M. Mazzone, G.M. Cormier, Youth with disabilities in the criminal justice system: Considerations for transition and rehabilitation planning, “Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders” 2008, no. 16(04), p. 240 and next.

18 J. Rhodes, B. Liang, R. Spencer, First..., *op. cit.*, p. 452 and next.

referral.¹⁹ However, systems have often pushed back and have not permitted mentors identified by the youths as suitable matches, due to background checks and perceived unsuitability.

Another program, the Aftercare for Indiana through Mentoring Program (AIM) model, provided a framework for the successful reentry of youths, measuring things like recommitment and employment.²⁰ Recommitment, defined as a return to the YRTC facility, is sometimes used as a measure of recidivism. Recommitment occurs when a youth cannot safely remain living in the community into which he or she was released, and the judge determines that the youth must return to the YRTC facility. Youths committed to a YRTC typically meet regularly with their reentry team to help prepare for life after commitment. The team meets monthly prior to release, to review the youth's progress, but also so that the youth can prepare for reentry (enroll in school, find suitable housing or placement.) The youth then has a court hearing 60 days prior to release to cover specific expectations, such as where the youth will live, school enrollment and attendance, and other individualized requirements contained in the court order (refrain from contacting delinquent peers, *etc.*) Once released, the youth is supervised by a probation officer, who observes whether the youth complies with the conditions of release. If the youth has serious infractions, for example repeatedly failing to follow the court order, running away, or committing new law violations post release, the youth can be recommitted to the YRTC.

3. The Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers (YRTCs)

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (NDHHS) operates the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers (YRTCs). At the time of our research, there were four facilities: one male facility, one female facility, one facility dedicated to youths who sexually offend, and a fourth facility that provided substance abuse treatment. Mentors only served youths on the two main campuses that provided generalized care. As treatment facilities, the YRTCs offered evidence-based behavioral and skill building programming. Individual therapy is offered for youths with behavioral and mental health needs, and case managers and therapists develop individual case plans for each youth. The aim of the YRTC is to provide programming that encourages youths to look at the change process and to gain skills to address their thinking errors and develop new skills and habits (dhhs.ne.gov).

19 *Ibidem*, p. 456.

20 G.R. Jarjoura, They, all come back: Reflections on a juvenile reentry initiative (Paper presentation). ACJJ Statewide Conference on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Arkansas 2003.

4. The Juvenile Reentry Mentoring Project (JRMP) for High-Risk Youth Protocol

The JRMP was developed to be a robust mentoring program using both a theoretical and a practical lens.

The Juvenile Justice Institute developed the JRMP by adapting important elements from models like AIM²¹ and YIM and integrating a developmental theoretical model and best practices in mentoring. Like the AIM, JRMP utilized college students as mentors for youths reentering the community from a YRTC. Because mentors receive extensive training on relational techniques, we expected that mentors would facilitate a developmental model of mentoring. The JRMP is based on a developmental mentoring model, which maintains that a healthy, trusting mentoring relationship can only be formed when the mentor believes and communicates that the young person is the expert on the subject of their own life, despite solid evidence of mistakes the youth has made. Therefore, mentors are encouraged to utilize motivational interviewing (MI) and coached to use this approach throughout the match. However, the day-to-day aspects of juvenile justice programs must go beyond theory and be shaped and molded by logical and practical operational considerations.

5. Practical Elements: Effective Practice for Mentoring

The *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* arose out of a desire to ensure that mentoring programs offered services in a responsible way but were not originally intended for a high-risk population. In 1990, MENTOR and the United Way came together to produce a set of six standards that met the needs of both youths and volunteers, while also ensuring participant safety and better outcomes. Over the years, these principles have been enhanced to incorporate research conducted on hundreds of mentoring relationships. The fourth edition, published in 2015, incorporated more than 400 peer reviewed journal articles, as well as the input of over 200 practitioners and mentoring programs.²² These standards were applied systematically to the design of JRMP for work in the Nebraska YRTCs and altered to meet continued needs for youths during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.1. Standard 1: Recruitment

Recruiting volunteers is critical for any mentoring program because it is the primary resource needed to operate the program. Some mentor programs

21 R. Jarjoura. Aftercare for Indiana through Mentoring. AIM Indiana's juvenile reentry program: Aftercare for Indiana through mentoring, 2004.

22 M. Garringer, J. Kupersmidt, J. Rhodes, R. Stelter and T. Tai. Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring, 4th Edition 2015, Final_Elements_Publication_Fourth.pdf (mentoring.org) (25.09.2021).

have reported difficulty recruiting mentors to match to youths in detention and rehabilitation centers. To ensure mentor suitability, it is critical to realistically describe the program's aims and expected outcomes.²³ JRMP mentors are recruited from the undergraduate student population, generally from one of the following departments: Criminology, Sociology, Educational Psychology, or Law/Legal Studies. Faculties that work within each department post fliers describing the service-learning course, the minimum requirements, and objectives. Students must sign up with permission, after being interviewed by the instructor who teaches the course.

During the first interview with the instructor, students are advised of the intensive service-learning environment of the class. Students are expected to travel to a detention facility that may be 1–2 hours away. Students must also commit to enroll in two semesters and agree to meet or communicate with mentees over breaks, when many students are vacationing. Furthermore, the intent of the JRMP is to form a long-lasting relationship, so the matched mentee is expected to continue beyond the students' completion of the course and even beyond university graduation. Students are advised of the level of trauma that many detained youths have sustained. The instructor further explains that students should not enroll or should feel free to drop the course prior to the match commitment, if they feel like they cannot make a substantial commitment in time and relationship to the young person to whom they are matched. Many students do not enroll after the first interview, especially if they realize that they have current obligations that prevent them from making the commitment required.

Youths are invited to participate in this program by the YRTC counselor or the facility volunteer coordinator. After the youth is invited, they must attend a session held at the facility where the JRMP process is explained. When we created our model, we wanted to provide youths a voice. Consequently, we created a process for the detained youths to meet all mentors and voice an opinion of whom they would like to be mentored by. To facilitate this, after four classroom-training sessions, students travel to the YRTC and youths conduct ten-minute interviews with each mentor. Afterwards, the students submit a journal to the JRMP instructor to indicate the top two youths whom they wish to be paired with (they will only be matched to one.) The director sends a list of proposed pairs to the facility. All youths are encouraged to tell a facility staffer or counselor the mentor with whom they wish to be matched. Youths may opt out of the program at any time, but students are not allowed to request a different mentee after the selection is made. Students may drop the course, but it is strongly encouraged to do this prior to being matched to a youth mentee.

23 M. Garringer, J. Kupersmidt, J. Rhodes, R. Stelter and T. Tai. Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring, 4th Edition 2015, Final_Elements_Publication_Fourth.pdf (mentoring.org) (25.09.2021).

5.2. Standard 2: Screening

Screening involves interviewing potential volunteers to assure the student is suitable and safe to work with youths. To work in a detention center in Nebraska, mentors must be approved volunteers within the YRTCs. Consequently, mentors must complete the application required by the facility as well as necessary background checks: Criminal history records check to include Criminal Background, Sex Offender Registry, and the Nebraska Abuse/Neglect Registry. In addition to safety, students must have a certain level of resiliency, and be willing learn to not take youths actions too personally.

5.3. Standard 3: Mentor Training

Mentoring programs generally provide training prior to matching the mentor to a youth. The aim of training is to provide mentors with the basic knowledge of the population they will be working with, and to incorporate communication styles that match the philosophy of the mentoring program. JRMP mentors attend three class sessions prior to making the first trip to the facility. The early classes focus on ensuring that students know the exact commitment that they are making. We reiterate the trauma and disruption this population has already experienced and stress to students that they can drop the course without repercussion within the appropriate university timeline. Students are given an overview of juvenile law, juvenile practice, and working with an adolescent population. During this time, students are given regular writing assignments designed to reveal any bias, immaturity, or naïveté. These assignments may uncover potential problems like the mentee failing to show up for meetings. Or they may reveal the students' underlying thoughts and biases. It is not that these students are excluded, rather the instructor may pay closer attention to those matched with a mentee, to ensure the interactions are healthy. The writing assignments include a brief autobiography that is used during the matching phase.

5.4. Standard 4: Matching and Initiating

Matching is important because certain strategies help increase the chances that the matched pair will continue to meet long-term, thereby providing support for the youths, especially for reentry into the community. To facilitate the matching process, the JRMP instructor gathers information about the student volunteer, which includes geographic preference, background checks, and the autobiography. Generally, the facility selects specific youth to be mentored, matching youths who have limited family support, or who receive few or no visits while they are detained. The instructor must work with the facility closely to ensure that at least these additional factors are considered: (1) does the youth pose any risk to the student? and (2) which town or city will the youth return to?

The facility director generally also reads the student's autobiography to determine which youths may be good matches. Once an initial group is determined, the facility

director meets with each youth individually to determine whether they would like a mentor. Often, this requires explanation of what a mentor is and what the mentee should expect.

Facility site visits. The faculty member teaching the course and the facility director arrange a date and time for the students to come to the facility. YRTC facilities require that all persons working on-site receive training. The first visit allows for student mentors to receive any required training, to learn the rules of the facility, and to tour the physical location where they will meet with youths. The visit also involves mentor and mentee interviews, which is a round-robin style of questioning that allows each mentor and mentee the opportunity to get to know each other while still interacting as a group. A typical schedule is as follows:

Typical Agenda:

11:00 am arrival time at facility. Orientation to entry in a secure facility (check in; keys, cell phones, other items will need to be locked up for security purposes).

11:20 am – 11:50 am – Lunch with the youths in the dining hall.

11:50 am – 1:00 pm – Tour of the facility

1:00 pm – 2:00 pm – Orientation to the facility (rules and required policies)

2:00 pm – 3:00 pm – Interviews with youths

After the visit, mentors are asked to submit a journal to the instructor, with the names of two youths they are interested in mentoring. The facility director or staff will then ask the potential mentees for their feedback. Furthermore, the facility will work with the program to ensure that no youth feels “left out” for example, if a student misses the orientation. All youths are matched to a mentor. Final match approval must be given by the juvenile’s legal guardian, but feedback from all interested parties is sought (probation, DHHS caseworkers, parent(s), foster parents, *etc.*). Instructors attempt to meet with the parent and guardian at this point in the case, but often the parents have disengaged, or parental rights have been terminated. However, mentors participate in the multi-disciplinary team that engages in the youth’s reentry process, and legal guardians are invited to this team.

Introduction of mentors and mentees. After the match is determined, students send an introductory letter to the mentee with a description of themselves and their interests and a day and time that they propose to visit for the first time. The mentor is then able to begin setting up bi-weekly visits but must call the facility the morning of their intended visit to ensure that the youth’s schedule and visitation status have not changed.

5.5. Standard 5: Monitoring and Weekly Support

Ongoing monitoring refers to the supervision of the mentor, and allows mentors to receive advice, brainstorm problems that come up in the match, increase their skills, and access resources the youths may need. Mentors participated in the JRMP from five college campuses that receive funding from a private foundation. Four of the universities fall under a state system, while the fifth is a private faith-based institution. On all campuses, students are expected to enroll in a year-long class, so that the match receives ongoing monitoring and support. After the introductory visits, mentors begin to meet with their mentee on average, every two weeks. Campuses that are closer to the facility generally require weekly meetings, while those further away require meetings once every three weeks. Mentors are expected to communicate via letter when they are unable to meet with their mentee. Students are required to submit a weekly journal to the instructor, in which they document activities the pair participated in and interactions with the youths. The journal is submitted for course credit. The journal also serves a larger purpose of informing the instructor of the student's perceptions, biases, preferences, concerns, and relationship with the youth. These journals may be shared with other involved juvenile justice professionals (the facility liaison, director, probation officer, or DHHS transition specialist) if deemed necessary and appropriate. Students are advised multiple times over the semester that their journals are documentation of visits and may be shared with the facility. However, if an issue arises that requires the instructor to share a journal, the student is notified and often asked to give further documentation.

Mentors initially meet with mentees onsite at the YRTC or a secure facility. Visits continue in the facility until the juvenile has been released to the community. When a student travels to the facility independent of the class—this must be pre-arranged with the facility and is dependent upon visiting hours, facility programming, and youth behavior and/ or safety. Once the youths have been released, mentors are encouraged to meet with the youths at a location that helps the youths accomplish a reentry task (getting a state ID or driver's license, work on a class project.) Mentors may assist the youths with completing schoolwork, studying for the GED, applying for and obtaining a job, and listening and providing constructive feedback while the youths deal with friend/family relationships. However, mentors are also encouraged to intermix these with activities that the youths enjoy. The university may sponsor a group community-based activity annually, like attendance at a performance or a show.

Prior to COVID-19, mentors met within the facility for the first semester of the course. Facilities were instructed to select youths that had roughly 3–6 months or treatment left. Occasionally, a youth would be released prior to this time. Early release is generally associated with a youth making rapid progress, or a dramatic change in the youth's situation. Typically, mentors would meet with a youth for a minimum

of three months prior to the youth's release. The Faculty on each campus tracked youth release dates, compiled data, and followed an established curriculum. JRMP staff entered basic demographics, referral information, and outcomes for each case, and combine it with data from the NDHHS. After the course ends, JRMP staff would contact students every six months to inquire whether they remained in contact with their mentee and whether the program should close the case.

5.6. Standard 6: Closure

It is important to both the mentor and the mentee that matches close in a way that “affirms the contributions of the mentor and mentee, and offers them the opportunity to prepare for the closure.”²⁴At the end of the academic year, the mentor is required to tell the instructor his or her intention regarding the match. If the match remains open, the project coordinator will contact the mentor every 60 days to check-in with the mentor. When a mentor can no longer commit to meeting with the youth, the student is encouraged to meet the youth in person to explain that the mentor is unable to continue the match. Whenever possible we close the match at a time of natural transition, *i.e.*, the mentor's graduation, military deployment, getting married, or moving out of state. However, often it is the youth who ends the match, by failing to keep meeting times. If the youth is unable to be located for more than two months, the mentor sends a letter to the youth's last known address. If after two letters the mentor has not heard from the youth and cannot reach him or her, a third letter is sent notifying the youth and guardian that the match is being closed. A copy of this letter is emailed to the probation officer and legal guardian.

6. COVID -19 Protocol Adjustments

During the pandemic almost all educational systems reverted to online methods for instruction or shut down campuses altogether. Youths in detention facilities were not permitted visitors, even parents and guardians were not allowed to see their children. In the U.S., juvenile justice programming shut down from roughly February 2020 to August 2020, with curtailed services still in place in some jurisdictions. In Nebraska, roughly one third of all counties returned available funding because they were unable to provide services to youths. This totaled an estimated \$1,077,290.²⁵During the COVID-19 pandemic, many theoretical underpinnings of the project remained intact, while various practical elements of the program were

24 M. Garringer, J. Kupersmidt, J. Rhodes, R. Stelter, T. Tai, *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*, 4th Edition, 2015, www.Final_Elements_Publication_Fourth.pdf (mentoring.org) (25.09.2021).

25 A. Hobbs, Private correspondence received 16.09.2021.

greatly impacted. Modifications to the program were made based on the outlined standards that guided program development.

6.1. Outcomes

On each of the campuses, JRMP students enrolled in the course during the fall semester, and the course continued through the spring. Consequently, when COVID-19 first appeared in the U.S, students had already undergone screening, matching, and training. This prevented the program from completely closing. Students also experienced a change in classroom format. Online classes allowed for ongoing mentor support and offered increased opportunities for private consultation with the instructor. However, when the JRMP began recruiting in fall 2020, class sizes were smaller due to the pandemic. Below we outline how COVID procedures impacted the best practice standards the program was built on.

6.2. Standard 1: Recruitment

Mentors continued to be recruited from the undergraduate student populations, across disciplines, but many students did not return to campus in the fall of 2020. Consequently, class sizes were smaller, and fewer mentors were available for youths. One of the University campuses had no students enroll for the JRMP course in fall 2020. This did not have a detrimental impact of the JRMP because detention rates in the U.S. (and Nebraska) also dropped by roughly 28% from March 2020 to March 2021.²⁶

6.3. Standard 2: Screening- COVID Procedures

During the pandemic, instructors utilized ZOOM to meet with interested students and to share information about the aims and expectations of the program. Students, however, were not required to make the same effort as they had prior to the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, instructors intentionally required students take multiple steps to arrange the screening interview, the steps included: 1) the School's advisor instructed the student to contact the instructor; 2) the instructor worked with the student to find a time to meet in person; 3) the instructor rescheduled the appointment; 4) the student met for the interview on campus. Post COVID, students had only to access the ZOOM link.

6.4. Standard 3: Mentor Training- COVID Procedures

The COVID classroom covered identical material, but private meetings with students increased by 50% using an online format. Prior to COVID, students were encouraged to share match related questions in the classroom setting. The instructor

26 Annie E. Casey Foundation. As Pandemic Eases, Youth Detention Population Creeps Up. Posted May 10, 2021, <https://www.aecf.org/blog/as-pandemic-eases-youth-detention-population-creeps-up> (26.09.2021).

would frame the issue and ask for related incidents from other students. The aim of this was to share complicated matters and establish that many matches had met obstacles. If the student was concerned about confidentiality, or violating their mentees trust, they approached the instructor after class. Often this still was not a private environment. Students post COVID sought private ZOOM meetings with the professor at twice the frequency than prior to COVID. Perhaps because of the private environment, mentors shared more in-depth information about obstacles in the match.

6.5. Standard 4: Matching and Initiating – COVID Procedures

The first adaptations to be made impacted ongoing support and how students would meet and communicate with their mentees. Prior to the pandemic, youths in detention facilities were never allowed to access computers, electronic devices, or cellular phones outside of classroom use. In addition, all visitors (parents, mentors, professionals) are typically required to turn in any cell phones or tablets prior to entering a facility. With JRMP adaptations, youths were permitted access to a computer to communicate with the mentor.

Prior to the pandemic, student-youth interviews lasted approximately ten minutes and were conducted using semi-private conversations in a speed-dating format. When facilities stopped allowing in-person visits, the JRMP adapted by requesting ZOOM or WEBEX meetings. (WEBEX is the State of Nebraska's secure electronic meeting platform used by the courts). Instructors intended to send students and youths to break out rooms for the matching process. However, the facilities did not have adequate electronic capacity and each youth did not have their own computer or tablet. Instead of individual meetings, facility staff brought youths in front of the computer one by one. Students appeared on ZOOM, and asked youth questions in a round robin format. The responses were heard by staff and sometimes other youths waiting for their turn to be interviewed.

6.6. Standard 5: Monitoring and Weekly Support – COVID Procedures

Prior to COVID, students met with their mentee in-person, within the facility, approximately every two weeks. Students were encouraged to use "props" like playing a game and bringing snacks, to increase engagement and move through the initial awkwardness. After the initial meetings, the mentor and mentee usually moved into deeper, more personal conversations about the youth's drug or alcohol use, sexuality, relationships, reentry plan, and education. Students wrote about these topics in their journals and submitted these for a grade.

During COVID, the mentee and mentor conversations were truncated by lack of privacy. Although visits were supervised prior to COVID, staff had physical distance that allowed for some privacy. With COVID protocol, supervising staff, wearing masks, sat in close proximity, to the youth and the computer screen. While this was

likely due to a concern that the youths would misuse the technology (*i.e.*, go to an inappropriate site, or make contact with someone outside the facility beyond their mentor), the impact was that the mentor and mentee had almost no opportunity for private conversation. Additionally, prior to COVID, mentors brought games and snacks when they visited the facility in person, which increased the likelihood that youth showed up for initial meetings. COVID procedures led to a lack of interest in initial visits, and youths began missing electronic visits. In addition, staff within the facility often forgot to bring the youths to the electronic appointment, or other competing appointments got scheduled for the limited computers. In short, electronic visits were easier to ignore and cancel than when the student appeared in person.

6.7. Standard 6: Closure – COVID Procedures

The process for match closure remained the same, but due to the lack of depth in relationships, few pairs matured to strong mentor-mentee relationships, and few of the pairs in the Covid cohort had well-established relationships that continued after the youth was released from the facility.

6.8. Discussion

During the worldwide pandemic, youths residing in detention and treatment facilities were impacted more than the general population. Youths were not allowed family visits at the facility, nor did they earn furloughs home.²⁷ Once facilities went into stringent COVID lock-down, many youths went months without any contact from people outside of the facility. In addition, staffing shortages led to further confinement. In addition, if an individual within a facility contracted COVID, youths were often confined to their rooms to mitigate spread. Youths reported spending up to 23 hours a day in their detention cell.²⁸

The JRMP was one of the few juvenile justice programs that remained, and continues to operate, despite COVID restrictions. The ability to pivot to an electronic meeting platform allowed the program to operate safely, but the format change impacted both the training the mentors received, as well as the quality of the relationships. Each of the elements of the JRMP curriculum were intentionally selected to enhance the mentor's skillset, establish expectations, and enhance the possibility that youth would have a long-term supportive person in their life.

Pre-COVID programmatic decisions allowed for college student mentors to build autonomy and responsibility through the multi-step processes required of them.

27 A. Kamenetz. COVID-19 Lockdowns Have Been Hard On Youth Locked Up. National Public Radio, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/29/979986304/covid-19-lockdowns-have-been-hard-on-youth-locked-up> (03.29.21).

28 A. Chang. Conditions In The Juvenile Facilities Worsen During The Coronavirus Pandemic. National Public Radio – All Things Considered. <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/15/857105187/conditions-in-the-juvenile-facilities-worsen-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic> (05.15.20).

For example, students were required to contact an instructor, set up an appointment, and meet on campus. Often the instructor would reschedule. This process is identical to the process student mentors (and juvenile justice professionals) take with the youths they work with. The use of ZOOM meetings for screening removed the often frustrating multi-step process that prepared mentors for the thwarted meetings with the youths. While the meetings with the instructors became easier, the electronic format for meeting with the youths became more difficult.

Prior to COVID, the faculty screened out students who could not manage scheduling, and re-scheduling appointments adeptly. For instance, students who arranged meetings and then failed to show up, or called for a second meeting without acknowledging missing the first, were deemed unsuitable as mentors because they failed to demonstrate follow through and commitment. This basic, yet critical skill, is vital for mentoring youths in detention facilities because so many of the youths have experienced abandonment. During classroom instruction, faculties teach on abandonment issues, but students often do not connect this to missing appointments and how the youths may respond. Youths who have experienced childhood trauma and abandonment issues may experience additional emotional harm when matched to a mentor who is cavalier about showing up.

Beyond the classroom, the use of ZOOM was even more detrimental to the formation of the mentor-mentee relationship. During the matching process, students were not able to meet one-on-one with potential mentees due to a lack of computers. Consequently, the matching process was done by bringing each youth before a panel of mentors. The format was overwhelming for many of the youths being interviewed, and the information shared was done in a group setting and was less intimate. Prior to the pandemic, during the match process youths would share important snippets from their life. Often the mentor keyed in on this and had a related experience and the common ground set the stage for the match. The group matching process limited sharing personal information, and this influenced how pairs formed.

Even once mentors were paired to a mentee, the ZOOM format did not allow for intimate and meaningful conversations. Staff closely supervised every aspect of the ZOOM meeting, often sitting within arm's reach of the computer. In some instances, staff spoke for the youth, or joined the conversation, especially if the youth was slow to respond. In addition, many meetings simply failed to happen. Students reported calling in at the appointed time for the ZOOM meeting and no one, neither staff, nor mentor, would appear. It was unclear whether youths were electing not to attend or if staff were failing to get them from their room, or if inadequate staffing led to an inability for staff to bring the youths forward. Prior to COVID, mentors would physically show up to the detention facility. The physical presence allowed the mentor to decipher whether the youth was refusing to meet or whether the youth had conflicting appointments. This was important information for the mentor to know about a developing match, and to discuss with the mentee. Prior to the pandemic,

if a mentee failed to keep two meetings, the JRMP directly asked whether the youth really wanted a mentor. Post COVID, youths did not even appear, aware that they had missed a meeting, and facility staff did not acknowledge it, leading to broken mentoring pairs.

Finally, prior to COVID, mentors sat in on the youth's reentry team meetings, where they met the youth's parent or guardian and juvenile justice professionals. This gave the mentor resources, for example the mentor might ask the probation officer for ways to help the youth complete the court plan. Or if the youth stopped attending pre-arranged meetings, mentors would ask the probation officer to gain insight on the youth's feeling about having a mentor.

Despite the impact on the mentoring relationship, there were some positive aspects that emerged from the adaption to COVID protocols. College campuses nationwide went to remote learning, and Nebraska followed suit. In many ways the online platform increased intimacy and connection between instructors and students. Students were virtually in the professor's living room, kitchen, or home office, and often got to meet other family members and family pets. Prior to the pandemic, students had to set up a time to meet during office hours, and many students simply did not make this extra step. The accessibility and more personal nature of class led to more specific conversations with students, and more honesty about the problems with the program.

Conclusions

The JRMP was one of the few juvenile justice programs in Nebraska that continued to operate during the pandemic. Major programmatic takeaways include utilizing Zoom for student training and relationship building with the instructor as well as connecting with youths using telephone calls. Rather than asking students to meet during office hours or speak with the instructor after class, Zoom was found to be an effective strategy for engaging with busy students and providing support on often difficult topics. Similarly, once in person visits resume, instructors will request that mentees be allowed to continue to utilize telephone calls to allow for additional methods of connection between mentors and youths. It is unlikely, however, that the JRMP will continue ZOOM meetings with mentor and mentee, while in the facility. Subsequent research will examine quantitative indicators of match quality, like the number of matches that ended prior to release from the facility and whether match lengths were statistically shorter during the pandemic. Future work should focus on recommitment rates and whether youths assigned a mentor have fewer subsequent law violations after release.

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