

### Citation

Schwartz, S., Rhodes, J., Spencer, R., & Grossman, J. (2013). Youth Initiated Mentoring: Investigating a new approach to working with vulnerable adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 52*, 155–169.

### Highlights

The study examined Youth Initiated Mentoring (YIM) within the context of the National Guard Youth Challenge Program (NGYCP). Unlike a traditional mentoring program in which mentors are assigned to youth, under YIM, youth nominate their own mentors.

- The authors conducted a quantitative analysis using data from the 9-, 21- and 38-month follow-up surveys administered as part of a national evaluation of NGYCP, along with qualitative analysis of interviews with a subsample of NGYCP participants.
- The study found that YIM mentors included family friends, extended family members and godparents, school and extracurricular staff, and religious leaders. By the 38-month follow-up survey, 56 percent of youth reported still being in contact with their mentors.
- In addition, NGYCP youth who were in contact with their mentors at the 38-month follow-up showed significant benefits on a range of outcomes compared with the control group.

### Features of Youth Initiated Mentoring in the National Guard Youth Challenge Program

The NGYCP began in the early 1990s. To be eligible, youth must be 16 to 18 years of age, have dropped out of or been expelled from school, be unemployed, not be drug users, and not be heavily involved in the criminal justice system. The 17-month program consists of a two-week Pre-Challenge phase, a 20-week Residential phase, and a one-year Post-Residential phase. Participants live in barracks-style housing (sometimes on a military base) in a disciplined environment during the first two phases. They wear their hair short, are referred to as cadets, and wear military uniforms. During the Residential phase, they participate in a number of different activities addressing eight core pillars: leadership/followership, responsible citizenship, service to community, life-coping skills, physical fitness, health and hygiene, job skills, and academic excellence. During the Post-Residential phase, after participants are placed in employment, education, or military service, they receive structured mentoring.

The YIM approach operated within the context of the broader NGYCP. Youth nominated one to three potential mentors at the time of application to NGYCP. These matches were finalized during the Residential phase and were expected to continue through at least the year-long Post-Residential phase. Mentors and mentees were expected to meet weekly, with at least two face-to-face meetings per month.

The key distinguishing feature of YIM is that youth selected their own mentors—typically, nonparental adults who were already part of their social networks. Mentors were approved by NGYCP staff and provided with training. Mentoring was voluntary, with no monetary compensation provided.

## Features of the Study

The study used a mixed-methods explanatory design, harnessing both quantitative and qualitative analysis of data. Goals of the analysis included characterizing the YIM relationships formed, determining whether more-enduring relationships were associated with better outcomes of NGYCP participants, and exploring whether certain characteristics of the matched mentor-mentee pair predicted more-enduring mentoring relationships.

To examine these research questions, the authors used qualitative analysis of follow-up surveys administered as part of a randomized controlled trial evaluation of the NGYCP ([see Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research reviews of NGYCP studies](#)). These surveys were administered 9, 21, and 38 months after random assignment. In addition, the authors examined mentors' data from the data management and reporting system the NGYCP programs used to record data on their participants and mentors. Finally, the authors analyzed qualitative data from interviews conducted with 30 youth who had been contacted for the final follow-up survey.

## Findings

The study found that mentors selected by youth as part of YIM included family friends, extended family members and godparents, school and extracurricular staff, and religious leaders. More than half (55 percent) of youth reported that they chose the mentors themselves and 37 percent reported being helped by parents. By the 38-month follow-up, 56 percent of youth reported still being in contact with their mentor.

NGYCP youth who were in contact with their mentors at the 38-month follow-up had significantly greater educational and labor market outcomes than youth in the control group.

Qualitative data suggested that enduring mentoring relationships could positively influence youths' outcomes, both by helping them be successful in the context of the NGYCP through provision of social-emotional support, guidance, and practical assistance to support their general development.

## Considerations for Interpreting the Findings

The study presented descriptive information on the nature of the YIM relationships formed and some potential mechanisms by which they could influence youths' educational and labor market outcomes. These findings did not, however, represent a causal impact of YIM on youth outcomes because the duration of the relationship was determined by the mentee and mentor; more research would be needed to establish that the duration of YIM relationships had an impact on youths' outcomes. The authors took care to not overstate the nature of the findings.

In addition, the study examined YIM within the context of the NGYCP. It is unclear whether these results would translate to YIM implemented in a different context.