RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADULT MENTORS AND PLACEMENT OUTCOMES
AMONG AT-RISK YOUTH

A Thesis

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Abstract

Approximately 1.3 million students drop out of school each year (National Guard Youth Foundation, 2012). The Youth Challe*NG*e Program, which caters to at-risk youths who have dropped out of high school, utilizes a mentoring program. This study examines the relationship between the youth having regular contact with a mentor and the youth's placement outcomes. The sample of this study included 215 youths who graduated in September of 2008 from the Youth Challe*NG*e Program (YCP) at the Gillis W. Long Center in Carville, LA. Data regarding each youth's placements during the post-residential phase and the number of contacts with his or her mentor were collected by secondary data analysis. The major finding of this study reveals that there is a statistically significant relationship between regular contact with mentors and placement outcomes for at-risk youths. Being the first study that empirically examined the mentoring aspect of YCP, this study advances the field of youth services in an important way.

Introduction

Every year in the United States approximately 1.3 million students drop out of high school, which increases their chances of being incarcerated, unemployed, or on government assistance (National Guard Youth Foundation [NGYF], 2012). Negative life experiences, such as poor parenting, poverty, violence, and racial discrimination, impose a huge toll on children and society, resulting in increases in delinquency rates, unemployment rates, and dropout rates (McCluskey, K., Noller, Lamoureux, & McCluskey, A., 2004). These negative experiences result in youth deemed at-risk being ill prepared to enter the work force and follow at-risk youth into adulthood. Adults who were considered at-risk as youths have a higher incidence of divorce, unemployment, physical and psychological problems, substance abuse, reliance on the welfare system, and criminal activity (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002). Mentors are instrumental in providing at-risk youths with additional guidance, affection, attention, and a sense of self-worth (Education Commission of the States [ECS], 2006).

Justification of the Study

Support for youths outside of their families becomes necessary when geographical or institutional factors lead to a separation of the youth from his or her parents or grandparents (Larkin, Sadler, & Mahler, 2005). Mentors are able to provide support to youths where support is lacking (Belshaw & Kritsonis, 2007). Mentoring has become a popular way to make up for this lack of adult support. In addition, mentoring promotes academic, social, and emotional development of youths (ECS, 2006). As of today, approximately 5,000 volunteer-based youth mentoring programs exist throughout the United States. These programs have a variety of sponsors, including government agencies, schools, businesses, universities, professional organizations, and nonprofit agencies (ECS, 2006). Previous research has shown that programs

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intended to foster social support as well as to provide positive support can be valuable to youths (Moody, Childs, & Sepples, 2003).

The purpose of this study is to explore the association of regular contact with a mentor and placement outcomes among at-risk youths. Most previous studies focus on the impact a mentor has on a youth in middle childhood to early adolescence, but this study explores the impact mentors have during late adolescence.

Brief Introduction of the Youth Challe*NG*e Program

The National Guard Youth Challe*NG*e Program (YCP) is a 17-month program for youth ages 16 to 19 who are considered at-risk (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2010). The program is divided into two phases. The first phase is called the residential phase (DOE, 2010). During the residential phase, the youths live in a quasi-military environment. They live in military barracks, wear uniforms similar to those worn by military personnel, and are exposed to military-like discipline (DOE, 2010). During this phase, the youths are also offered the opportunity to obtain a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, as well as receiving training to promote positive development in various areas of their lives (DOE, 2010). The residential phase will be discussed further in the following section.

After completing the residential phase, the youths participate in the post-residential phase, which lasts 12 months. During the post-residential phase each youth maintains communication with a staff member of YCP, called a case manager (DOE, 2010). In addition to having a case manager, each youth is also paired with a mentor, who is nominated by the youth (DOE, 2010). YCP staff conducts a background check on the nominated mentor and may either approve or deny the pairing based upon the results (DOE, 2010). Each youth is expected to use the training and education he or she received at the program and become productive members of

society (DOE, 2010). A cadet is considered to have achieved this productive member status if he or she is employed, in school full-time, or enlisted in the military (DOE, 2010). The post-residential phase will also be discussed in greater detail in the literature review section.

Description of the Study

The sample for this study consists of 215 youths who participated in the post-residential phase of YCP at the Gillis W. Long Center in Carville, Louisiana, from September 2008 to September 2009. This study determines the importance of youths having an adult mentor, specifically, whether regular contacts between youths and their mentors are associated with the productivity of youths, as defined by employment, school enrollment, or military enlistment (National Challenge Institute, 2011). Case records kept by each case manager were used to obtain the information used.

Review of Literature

This literature review discusses at-risk youths and the impact of mentors. First, the resilience framework is discussed in relation to at-risk youth. Next, the definitions for at-risk youth and mentor are discussed. Then the impact of a mentor on an at-risk youth is discussed. Lastly, a brief description of the Youth Challe*NG*e Program is given.

Resilience Framework

The resilience framework states that psycho-social risk factors and protective factors work together to promote positive outcomes or to lessen negative outcomes (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Jessor (1992) proposed that risk factors and protective factors work hand-in-hand, and that risk factors may be counterbalanced by protective factors. The concept of risk maintains that certain events, characteristics, or other qualities found in the social environment have an increased chance of compromising a person's health, quality of life, or his or her life expectancy. Risk factors can be divided in family, environment, and individual conditions. Protective factors are internal and external influences that aid an individual in dealing with risk (Jessor, 1992). Resilience occurs when a positive outcome is reached after an individual is exposed to risk factors and protective factors contributed to the adaptation (Jessor, 1992).

One important protective factor is social support (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Research has shown that, in union with social support, purpose of life and determination are important factors in promoting resilience (Krumpfer & Bluth, 2004). According to Hurd and Zimmerman (2010), adolescents reported having similar levels of social support from their non-parental role models and their mothers, but reported receiving more support from their non-parental role models than their fathers. This suggests that having a non-parental adult as a support system is

important for youth, and these adults may provide additional resources to protect the youths from risk factors they may face (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010).

Non-parental mentors may play many roles in a youth's life, which include providing constant support, instilling moral values, teaching knowledge and skills, inspiring and motivating the youth, and encouraging self-esteem (Southwick, Morgan, Vythilingam, & Charney, 2005). Research has found that adolescents with mentors have fewer behavior problems and more positive attitudes than adolescents without mentors (Southwick *et al.*, 2005). Mentors have been shown to foster resilience in adolescents by serving as a buffer for risk factors (Southwick *et al.*, 2005). Mentors expose their mentees to broader environments in addition to pushing the mentee to face new challenges and expanding his or her social network. Mentors also assist mentees in enhancing resilience through modeling. When a mentee observes his or her mentor's cognitive strategies and behaviors while coping with risk factors, the mentee may pick up these behaviors and become more resilient (Southwick et al., 2005).

Hurd and Zimmerman (2010a) conducted two studies regarding adolescent resilience and the effects of mentors. Participants in both studies were African American adolescents during their senior year of high school or what would have been their senior year if they were no longer enrolled in school. These authors followed 615 participants through the five years following high school graduation, or the equivalent if they did not graduate from high school (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010a). Hurd and Zimmerman's (2010b) other study consisted of 93 mothers who were pregnant or had children during their senior year of high school or the equivalent if they were no longer enrolled. Both studies found that adolescents with mentors had a greater overall decrease of depressive symptoms than those participants who did not have mentors, controlling

for stress level. The findings of both studies support the idea that mentors promote resilience in adolescents by serving as protective factors (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010a, 2010b).

In summary, previous research on adolescent resilience has shown that mentors can serve as protective factors for at-risk adolescents (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, and Alessandri, 2002). Relationships between at-risk adolescents and mentors provide the adolescent with a sense of self-worth, which may result in them being less vulnerable to stressors, and consequently experiencing depressive symptoms (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Limitations of the previous studies include that no data were collected concerning the amount of contacts with the mentors and the outcomes of the participants. Another limitation of previous studies is that participants were only asked about the presence of a mentor and not the amount of contacts between the mentor and adolescents. A third limitation of previous studies is that the sample was not diverse, as both samples only included African American adolescents (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010).

Limited research exists about at-risk youth in Louisiana, which makes the present study unique. Also, the data collected for this study focus on associations between regular contact between the adolescent and mentor and life outcomes of the adolescents while previous studies focused on the presence of a mentor and not contacts. In addition, the sample of the present study is more diverse, including adolescents of different ethnicities.

Defining At-Risk Youth and Mentor

Various definitions of an at-risk youth exist, but the majority of those definitions include a lack of social support, particularly family support. According to Keating, Tomishima, Foster, and Alessandri (2002), at-risk youth come from single-parents homes. They experience emotional or behavioral problems and have little support navigating developmental tasks (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002). Other definitions of at-risk youth include

underprivileged or low socioeconomic backgrounds (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). In addition, these youth also experience less family guidance and/or lack a positive role model (DuBois et al., 2002). The National Challenge Institute (2011) defines an at-risk youth as any youth who is unlikely to graduate from high school on schedule. These youths also lack both the skills and self-esteem necessary to be successful in various areas, such as work, leisure, culture, community affairs, and interpersonal relationships (National Challenge Institute, 2011). This definition of at-risk youth will be used throughout this study.

A mentor is an adult who forms a caring relationship with the youth, but is not the youth's parent (Meyer & Bouchey, 2010). A mentor serves as an educational and support figure, promotes learning and competence of the youth, exposes the youth to positive social norms, increases the youth's sense of self confidence, and helps the youth reach his or her full potential (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). This relationship between a youth and his or her mentor usually involves the mentor and youth spending quality time together, such as seeing a movie, going to dinner together, or participating in an activity the youth enjoys. In addition, the mentor provides both support and guidance to help the youth overcome life's difficulties (Keating et al., 2002). Results from previous studies have shown that as the relationship develops over time, the youth becomes more open to the mentor providing emotional support and positive attention (Karcher, 2005).

Belshaw and Kritsonis (2007) listed several goals that mentors should aim to achieve. First, the mentor provides guidance to the youth that he or she may not receive at home. The mentor also promotes growth in both personal and social responsibilities of the youth (Belshaw & Kritsonis, 2007). The mentor boosts the youth's participation in academics, as well as the youth's abilities to profit from an education (Belshaw & Kritsonis, 2007). The mentor

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discourages the illegal use of drugs and alcohol, violence and use of weapons, promiscuous behavior, and other illegal, harmful or potentially harmful behaviors (Belshaw & Kritsonis, 2007). Lastly, the mentor encourages the youth to set goals and plan for his or her future (Belshaw & Kritsonis, 2007).

Impact of a Mentor on an At-Risk Youth

Adolescents experience a state of transition and face many unique challenges. These challenges include developing his or her identity and an increase in independence (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). If these obstacles are not handled properly, they can produce negative outcomes for the adolescent (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Kashani, Reid, and Rosenberg (1989) found that youths who reported having lower levels of social support were more hopeless about their futures, more introverted, more inattentive, and more harmful to others than others who received higher levels of support. Thornberry (1995) found a strong correlation between the causes of delinquency and the influence of peers combined with a lack of emotional support from parents. Previous research has shown that at-risk youths who have not identified with appropriate role models are at higher risk for developing delinquent behavior patterns (Keating et al., 2002). Keating et al. (2002) followed 72 youths who were considered at-risk, between ages 10 and 17, for six months. Of the group, 34 youths in the intervention group were paired with a mentor, and 34 youths were placed in the nonintervention group and were not paired with a mentor (Keating et al., 2002). The researchers found that youths in the nonintervention group reported a significantly higher rate of delinquent behaviors than youths who received the intervention. Participants in this study were not randomly assigned; therefore, causality could not be established (Keating et al., 2002).

Mentors provide role models with whom youths might identify, which may lead to a decrease in delinquency and an increase in positive behavior. Delinquent acts in Keating et al.'s (2002) study was defined as fighting, behavioral problems in school or another environment, poor school performance or attendance, or minor crimes such as theft or vandalism (Keating et al., 2002). The post-intervention mean (12.6) for delinquent acts was significantly lower than the pre-intervention mean (15.5) for delinquent acts (Keating et al., 2002).

Keating et al. (2002) found that youths who had regular contact with their mentors were more trusting of their parents and guardians and more likely to be truthful. Also, these youth were more likely to feel that they were supported and felt less criticized by their peers than those youths without mentors (Keating et al., 2002). In addition, youths with mentors were less likely than the youths without mentors to use illegal drugs, start drinking, skip a day of school, and skip a class (Keating et al., 2002). There was a strong direct correlation between the length of the mentoring relationship and success of the youth (Keating et al., 2002). However, since participants were not randomly assigned to conditions, it is possible that the youth with the most successful mentoring relationships were those who had higher levels of social skills to start with.

Previous research has also shown that effective mentoring is associated with lower involvement in criminal activities and school dropout rates among youths (Belshaw & Kritsonis, 2007). Also, youths who participated in mentoring relationships were more likely to experience favorable outcomes in education and work, reduced delinquent behavior, emotional wellness, and health (Education Commission of the States, 2006). DuBois and Silverthorn (2005) found that youths with mentors were more likely to complete high school than youths who did not have mentors. Also, youths with mentors were less likely to be a member of a gang, injure another person in a fight, or participate in risky behaviors (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Mentoring

programs have been found to be more effective when youth experiencing individual and/or environmental risk are targeted compared to those programs targeting youth experiencing neither risk (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). These studies are correlational studies.

The National Guard Youth Challe*NG*e Program (YCP), which will be described further in the following section, is a program that implements the use of a mentor. Through being paired with a mentor, each youth is provided additional social support as well as a responsible adult to hold the youth accountable for his or her decisions and actions. These mentors are also able to assist the youth in finding employment opportunities in the community and help the youths with school work.

One limitation of previous studies is that mentoring programs rely heavily on volunteers and funding. YCP is completely funded by the government, and the mentors are people that the youths knew prior to enrolling in the program. Another limitation of previous studies is that mentoring alone is not enough to adequately address the needs of the youths. Through participating in YCP, the youth will also have access to YCP staff members who can assist in finding job and educational placements and who can contact a recruiter for those youths interested in enlisting in the military. Lastly, in addition to the previously mentioned improvements, this is the first study that focuses on at-risk youths at YCP in Louisiana.

<center>**Description of Youth Challe*NG*e Program**</center>

Overview of the program

The Center for Strategic and International Studies began a project in the late 1980s, which was aimed to help youths that had been expelled from school or had dropped out (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation [Millenky, Bloom, Muller-Ravett, & Broadus, 2011). The National Guard Bureau in the U.S. Department of Defense staff created a program model, and the Youth Challe*NG*e Program (YCP) was born (Millenky et al., 2011). YCP was designed to be an intervention that would provide the youths with the skills and experiences necessary to be successful in society (Millenky et al., 2011). Ten pilot sites were funded by Congress in 1993, with the funding becoming permanent in 1998 (Millenky et al., 2011). As of today, 34 YCP sites exist in 29 states and Puerto Rico (Millenky et al., 2011). The government funds the program, with the federal government paying 75% of the costs and states providing the remaining 25% (Millenky et al., 2011).

Application process

Youths wishing to participate in YCP are required to meet basic requirements. The youth must be between the ages of 16 and 18. The youth may be 19 on the date of the program's graduation (National Guard Youth Challenge Program [NGYCP], 2011). The youth should no longer be enrolled in school and should not be employed upon the first day of the cycle. Also, the youth should be a citizen or legal resident of the United States in addition to being a resident of the state of the program he or she wishes to attend (NGYCP, 2011). If the youth is currently on probation, it must be only for juvenile status offenses. The youth may not be incarcerated, awaiting sentencing, under indictment, charged, or convicted of a felony or capital offense (NGYCP, 2011). Also, the youth must be capable of passing a drug test (NGYCP, 2011). If

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these requirements are met, the youth may submit an application and partake in interviews, which are conducted by YCP staff.

At the interview site, youths and their parents or guardians are shown a video about the program in addition to viewing a presentation given by YCP staff. After viewing the video and presentation, parents are asked to leave the room while the applicants complete a self-history evaluation form. After completing this form, applicants are interviewed by YCP staff. Each form contains information such as the last grade the applicant completed, any medical conditions, mental health history, and any legal issues the applicant has. Applicants who suffer from mental illness, including depression or anxiety that is not controlled with medication, or who have made recent suicide attempts are not likely to be accepted into the program due to the high stress associated with the imposition of external structure in the program. Applicants with felony charges are not admitted to the program. After the YCP staff member and the applicant discuss the self-history evaluation form, the applicant is asked to rate his or her desire to attend the program on a scale of one to five, one being the lowest and five being the highest. Applicants who do not show a strong desire to participate in the program are not likely to be accepted.

Following the interview, the YCP staff member that interviewed the applicant rates his or her overall impression of the applicant. This rating is also done on a scale of one to five, with one being not impressed and five being extremely impressed. The lead counselor, the lead instructor, a nurse, the deputy director, and the director review each application packet and decide which applicants should be accepted to the program. Applicants with higher desire to attend the program are more likely to be admitted than those with lower desire. Once the applicant is admitted, he or she begins the first phase of the two-phase program.

Residential Phase

The first two weeks of the residential phase are referred to as acclimation (NGYCP, 2011). This phase is a period of assessment and orientation to the program, and it is both physically and mentally demanding (Millenky et al., 2011). During this phase, the youths are called candidates and are introduced to the rules and expectations of the program (Millenky et al., 2011). The candidates also live at the program site, which is usually a military base. During this phase, the emphasis is on military-like customs, discipline, structure, teamwork, and physical fitness training (Millenky et al., 2011).

Upon completing the acclimation phase, the candidates are formally enrolled into the program and are then called cadets (Millenky et al., 2011; NGYCP, 2011). During the remaining 20 weeks of the residential phase, cadets focus on eight core components: "Leadership/Followership, Responsible Citizenship, Service to Community, Life-Coping Skills, Physical Fitness, Health and Hygiene, Job Skills, and Academic Excellence" (Millenky et al., 2011). The majority of the cadet's day is spent focusing on the academic component during the residential phase (Millenky et al., 2011). Cadets prepare to take the General Educational Development (GED) exam, which is given prior to graduation of the residential phase (NGYCP, 2011).

The environment of the program is considered quasi-military. The cadets are separated into platoons, live in the military barracks, wear uniforms that resemble those of the military, partake in military-like discipline, and males are required to shave their heads (Millenky et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Cadets are also closely monitored by staff at all times and have a highly structured schedule (Millenky et al., 2011).

During the residential phase, the cadets select their mentors. The mentors must be at least 23 years old and must be the same sex as the cadet, unless otherwise approved. Most importantly, the mentor should be willing to provide guidance and encouragement to the adolescent. The mentor should be employed or enlisted in the military and should encourage the adolescent to be a productive member of society either by being employed or in school for up to 30 hours per week or being enlisted in the military. The mentor cannot be a parent or sibling, but he or she can be related to the adolescent. For example, the mentor may be a grandparent, cousin, or aunt or uncle. The majority of youths have relatives as their mentors. Once the cadets have selected their mentors, the mentors are required to complete an application and get fingerprinted. YCP staff completes background checks on all the applying mentors. The applicant also cannot have any felony charges, but may have misdemeanors, depending upon the severity of the charge.

Mentoring Training

After being approved by YCP staff, mentors are required to attend a six-hour mentor training program that is led by YCP staff. During this program, the mentors are given an overview of the program and the eight core components are discussed. Next, the definition of a mentor and the responsibilities of the mentors, both during the residential and post-residential phase, are discussed. The two main requirements for mentors during the residential phase are to attend the training program and to maintain communication with the youth via phone or letters. During the post-residential phase, mentors are responsible for providing support, guidance, and encouragement to keep the youths in pursuit of their goals that are set during the residential phase (Hooker, 2011).

The training discusses the basic needs of youths and the stages of the mentor and mentee relationship. The training facilitators then discuss the instruments of success in the relationships between the mentor and youth. The importance of the mentor listening to the youth is then discussed. An important aspect of this training program is the quality time that the mentor and cadet spend together. The two eat lunch together and participate in activities that will aid in strengthening their relationship. Upon completing the training, both the mentor and cadet are required to sign a mentor/cadet agreement. This agreement states that the two plan to be committed to each other and to completing the post-residential phase (Hooker, 2011).

Post-Residential Phase

Following the residential phase, the cadets participate in the post-residential phase. The goal of this phase is for cadets to maintain and build upon the achievements made during the residential phase (NGYCP, 2011). This phase lasts 12 months and is structured as a mentoring program (DOE, 2010; Millenky *et al.*, 2011). The cadets select their own mentors, and these mentors are both screened and trained by YCP staff (DOE, 2010; Millenky *et al.*, 2011). Mentors play a crucial role in the continued success of the cadets. Mentors assist the cadets with the transition from the structured environment of YCP to self-management in addition to providing support and guidance to the cadets while executing their life plans (NGYCP, 2011).

During the post-residential phase, the cadets are required to have regular contact, a minimum of two contacts with their mentors each month (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Cadets are also required to have a placement that has been approved by YCP, but they are able to change placements during the 12 months. Acceptable placements include the cadet continuing his or her education, employment, or enlistment in the military (DOE, 2010; Millenky *et al.*,

2011). During this time, an YCP staff member maintains monthly communication with both the

cadet and his or her mentor (DOE, 2010; Millenky *et al.*, 2011).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between at-risk youths having regular contacts with their adult mentors and placement outcomes of at-risk youths. The variables in the following sections are adopted from the Youth Challe*NG*e Program requirements. The observational period consisted of 12 months from September 2008 to September 2009. This study hypothesizes that cadet placement is dependent upon regular contact with a mentor. Three specific hypotheses were further developed: employment placement is associated with regular contact with a mentor, education placement is dependent on regular contact with a mentor, and military placement is dependent on regular contact with a mentor.

<center>**Methods**</center>

Design

  This study utilizes a secondary data analysis. All data were previously collected by staff members of the Youth Challe*NG*e Program at the Gillis W. Long Center in Carville, LA. This study was approved by the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board with the approval number E5504.

Data

  The data used in this study are administrative data that have already been collected by the Youth Challe*NG*e Program case manager, and participants will remain anonymous. Each case record was assigned a number and no identifying information about the cadets was revealed.

Explanation of Variables

  Regular Contact.

  The independent variable of this study is regular contact between the at-risk youth and his or her mentor. Regular contact is operationalized as two contacts, either per telephone or face-to-face, each month throughout the 12 month period from September 2008 to September 2009 for the post-residential phase. Number of contacts was measured at the ratio level, ranging from zero to two for each month and zero to 24 for all 12 cumulative months. For the purpose of data analysis and to be consistent with YCP's operational definition, this variable is recoded to a nominal level measurement: "0" is assigned for non-regular contact (less than a total of 24 contacts) and "1" is assigned for regular contact (total of 24 contacts). This is measured upon the completion of the post-residential phase.

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Placement outcomes.

The dependent variable of this study is a placement outcome for the youth. Placement outcomes are operationalized as the youth being employed for 30 hours per week, in school for 30 hours per week, or enlisted in the military. A value of "0" is assigned for non-placement outcomes and "1" is assigned for placement outcomes. These were measured at the nominal level as the cadet having a placement or not having a placement. This variable was observed at the twelfth month of the post-residential phase because their placements at the twelfth month are considered a better indicator of future productivity. This is measured upon the completion of the post-residential phase.

Demographic Characteristics of Cadets.

Demographic characteristics consist of the following: ethnicity, gender, age, family income, and educational level, which were measured during the application process. Ethnicity was self-reported by the cadets and included the following: White (not of Hispanic Origin), Black (not of Hispanic Origin), Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaskan Native, or Other. Ethnicity was measured at the nominal level. Gender was self-reported by the cadet as male or female. This was measured at the nominal level. Age was determined using the cadets' years of birth, measured at the ratio level.

Family income was measured at the ordinal level in the following categories of earnings per year, self-reported by the cadet: less than $15,000; $15,000 to $25,000; $25,000 to $35,000; $35,000 to $45,000; and greater than $45,000. Educational level was measured by cadets' scores on Pre-TABE (Test for Adult Basic Education) tests, which are administered during the first week of the residential phase to gauge the cadets' highest level of education. Educational level was measured at the ratio level.

Data Analysis

For all continuous variables, the study reported descriptive statistics with mean and standard deviation. For all nominal variables, the study reported descriptive statistics with frequencies and percentages. To determine the relationship between having a positive mentor and youths' positive life outcomes, the study conducted a chi-square test of independence.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

 Demographics.

  Descriptive characteristics of 215 graduates of the Youth Challe*NG*e Program at Carville, Louisiana are shown in Table 1. Upon completion of the post-residential phase, 27% (n= 58) of the cadets were 17 years old, 54% (n= 116) were 18 years old, 15.3% (n= 33) were 19 years old, 3.3% (n= 7) were 20 years old, and .5% (n= 1) was 21 years old. Most of the participants in this study were male (79.1%). Majority of the participants were non-Hispanic white, (51.2%), while 43.3% (n= 93) were non-Hispanic black, and 5.7% (n= 12) were Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaskan Native, or other. Upon entering the program, 73 (34.0%) cadets scored below a sixth grade level in reading skills, 73 (33.9%) scored between a sixth and eighth grade level, and 69 (32.1%) scored on a high school level. In mathematics, over half (52.6%) scored below a sixth grade level, while 74 (36.8%) scored on a middle school level and only 21 (9.8%) scored over a ninth grade level. Nearly one-fourth of the cadets (23.3%) reported a family income of less than $15,000 a year, 32 (14.9%) reported an income of $15,000 to $25,000, 26 (12.1%) reported making $25,001 to $35,000, 37 (17.2%) reported making $35,001 to $45,000, and 45 (20.9%) reported making greater than $45,000. Twenty-five cadets (11.6%) did not report their families' annual incomes.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics

Variable	All (N=215) N (%)
Age	
17	58 (27.0)
18	116 (54.0)
19	33 (15.3)
20	7 (3.3)
21	1 (.5)
Gender	
Male	170 (79.1)
Female	45 (20.9)
Ethnicity	
White, not of Hispanic origin	110 (51.2)
Black, not of Hispanic origin	93 (43.3)
Hispanic	6 (2.8)
Asian/Pacific Islander	1 (.5)
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1 (.5)
Other	4 (1.9)
Educational Level Reading	
Below 6th grade	73(34.0)
6th – 8th grade	73(33.9)
9th – 12th grade	69(32.1)
Educational Level Math	
Below 6th grade	113(52.6)
6th – 8th grade	74(37.6)
9th – 12th grade	21(9.8)
Family Income	
Not Reported	25(11.6)
Less than $15,000	50(23.3)
$15,000– $25,000	32(14.9)
$25,001– $35,000	26(12.1)
$35,001– $45,000	37(17.2)
Greater than $45,000	45(20.9)

Demographics and Regular Contacts.

Table 2 shows a demographic comparison between cadets with regular contact with their mentors (n=85) and those with non-regular contact (n=130). This descriptive analysis was run post hoc. There were no major differences regarding demographics between the cadets with regular contact and those with non-regular contact.

Table 2

Demographics and Contacts Among Cadets

Characteristic	Regular Contact n (%)	Non-Regular Contact n (%)
Age		
17	30(35.3)	28(21.5)
18	44(51.8)	72(55.4)
19	11(12.9)	22(16.9)
20	0(0.0)	7(5.4)
21	0(0.0)	1(0.8)
Gender		
Male	71(83.5)	99(76.2)
Female	14(16.5)	31(23.8)
Ethnicity		
White, not of Hispanic origin	46(54.1)	64(49.2)
Black, not of Hispanic origin	32(37.6)	61(46.9)
Hispanic	3(3.5)	3(2.3)
Asian/Pacific Islander	2(2.4)	2(1.5)
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1(1.2)	0(0.0)
Other	1(1.2)	0(0.0)
Educational Level Reading		
Below 6th grade	28(32.9)	47(36.2)
6th – 8th grade	33(38.9)	46(35.3)
9th –12th grade	24(28.2)	37(28.5)
Educational Level Math		
Below 6th grade	42(49.4)	72(55.4)
6th – 8th grade	38(44.7)	45(34.6)
9th –12th grade	5(5.9)	13(10.0)

Regular Contacts and Placement.

Most cadets did not have regular contact with their mentors (60.5%), and about one-fifth were not placed at month 12 (20.5%), as shown in Table 3. Of the 215 cadets, 99 (46%) reported an employment placement, 43 (20.0%) an education placement, 16 (7.4%) being in the military, and 13 (6.0%) a miscellaneous placement at month 12.

Table 3

Regular Contacts and Placement at Month 12 Among Cadets

Characteristic	N (%)
Contacts	
Regular	85 (39.5)
Non-Regular	130 (60.5)
Placement	
None	44 (20.5)
Employment	99 (46.0)
Education	43 (20.0)
Military	16 (7.4)
Miscellaneous	13 (6.0)

Placements vs. Non-Placements.

Table 4 shows a demographic comparison between cadets with placement at month 12 (n=171) and those with no placement (n=44). Of those cadets with placement, 45.0% reported having regular contact with their mentors. Of the 44 cadets with no placement at month 12, 81.8% reported not having regular contact with their mentors. Over half of the cadets with placement were 18 years old (53.2%), while 26.3% were 17, 17.0% were 19, 2.9% were 20, and .6% were 21 years old. Of those cadets with no placement, over half were 18 years old (56.8%), 29.5% were 17, 9.1% were 19, and 4.5% were 20 years old. Majority of those with placement

(78.4%) and those with no placement (81.8%) were males. Of those cadets with placement, majority (52.0%) were non-Hispanic white, while 42.7% were non-Hispanic black, 2.9% were Hispanic, .6% were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1.8% were other. Of the cadets with no placement, 47.7% were non-Hispanic white, 45.5% were non-Hispanic black, 2.3% were Hispanic, 2.3% were American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 2.3% were other.

In reading 35.7% of the cadets with placement scored below a sixth grade level, while 32.7% scored between a sixth and eighth grade level, and 31.6% scored on a ninth grade level or above. Of the cadets with no placement, 27.3% scored below a sixth grade level, 38.6% scored on a middle school level, and 34.1% scored on a high school level in reading. The majority of cadets with placement (53.2%) scored below a sixth grade level in mathematics, while 38.0% scored between sixth and eighth grade levels, and 8.8% scored on a ninth grade level or higher. Half of the cadets with no placement (50.0%) scored on an elementary level in math, while 36.4% scored on a middle school level, and 13.6% scored on a high school level.

Of the cadets with placement, 19.9% reported an annual family income of less than $15,000, 16.4% reported between $15,000 and $25,000, 10.5% reported between $25,001 and $35,000, 17.5% reported between $35,001 and $45,000, 21,6% reported greater than $45,000, and 14.0% did not report. Of the cadets with no placement, 36.4% reported that their families made less than $15,000, 9.1% reported between $15,000 and $25,000, 18.2% reported between$25,001 and $35,000, 15.9% reported between $35,001 and $45,000, and 18.2% reported greater than $45,000 annually, while 2.3% did not report.

Table 4

Percentage of Placements and Non-Placements at Month 12 Among Cadets

Characteristic	Placement n (%)	No Placement n (%)
Contacts		
Regular	77(45.0)	8(18.2)
Non-Regular	94(55.0)	36(81.8)
Age		
17	45(26.3)	13(29.5)
18	91(53.2)	25(56.8)
19	29(17.0)	4(9.1)
20	5(2.9)	2(4.5)
21	1(.6)	0(0.0)
Gender		
Male	134(78.4)	36(81.8)
Female	37(21.6)	8(18.2)
Ethnicity		
White, not of Hispanic origin	89(52.0)	21(47.7)
Black, not of Hispanic origin	73(42.7)	20(45.5)
Hispanic	5(2.9)	1(2.3)
Asian/Pacific Islander	1(0.6)	0(0.0)
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0(0.0)	1(2.3)
Other	3(1.8)	1(2.3)
Educational Level Reading		
Below 6th grade	61(35.7)	12(27.3)
$6^{th} - 8^{th}$ grade	56(32.7)	17(38.6)
$9^{th} - 12^{th}$ grade	54(31.6)	15(34.1)
Educational Level Math		
Below 6th grade	91(53.2)	22(50.0)
$6^{th} - 8^{th}$ grade	65(38.0)	16(36.4)
$9^{th} - 12^{th}$ grade	15(8.8)	6(13.6)
Family Income		
Not Reported	24(14.0)	1(2.3)
Less than $15,000	34(19.9)	16(36.4)
$15,001– $25,000	28(16.4)	4(9.1)
$25,001– $35,000	18(10.5)	8(18.2)
$35,001– $45,000	30(17.5)	7(15.9)
Greater than $45,000	37(21.6)	8(18.2)

Crosstab Results.

Table 5 reveals that 171 cadets had placements at month 12. Of the 171, 94 did not have regular contact with their mentors, while 77 cadets had regular contact with their mentors. Of the 44 cadets who did not have a placement at month 12, 36 did not have regular contact with their mentors and 8 did have regular contact with their mentors. This shows that a greater proportion of cadets with no placement did not have regular contact with their mentors (see Table 5).

Table 5

Crosstab Results of Regular Contacts and Placement at Month 12 Among Cadets

	Placement		
	No	Yes	Total
Regular Contacts			
No	36	94	130
Yes	8	77	85
Total	44	171	215

Table 6 shows that, of the 85 cadets with regular contact, 46 cadets had an employment placement, while 39 did not have an employment placement. Of the 130 cadets with non-regular contact, 53 cadets were placed in employment. Seventy-seven cadets had neither regular contact nor an employment placement (see Table 6).

Table 6

Crosstab Results of Regular Contacts and Employment Placement at Month 12 Among Cadets

	Employment		
	No	Yes	Total
Regular Contacts			
No	77	53	130
Yes	39	46	85
Total	116	99	215

Table 7 shows that, of the 85 cadets with regular contact, 20 cadets had an education placement and 65 cadets did not have an education placement. Of the 130 cadets with non-regular contact, 23 were placed in education and 107 cadets were not in education (see Table 7).

Table 7

Crosstab Results of Regular Contacts and Education Placement at Month 12 Among Cadets

	Education		
	No	Yes	Total
Regular Contacts			
No	107	23	130
Yes	65	20	85
Total	172	43	215

Of the 85 cadets with regular contact, only six cadets were enlisted in the military (see Table 8). Seventy-nine had regular contacts with their mentors, but were not enlisted in the military. Of the 130 cadets with non-regular contact, 10 were enlisted in the military and 120 were not enlisted in the military (see Table 8).

Table 8

Crosstab Results of Regular Contacts and Military Placement at Month 12 Among Cadets

	Military		
	No	Yes	Total
Regular Contacts			
No	120	10	130
Yes	79	6	85
Total	199	16	215

Statistical Analysis

As previously discussed, 77 cadets had regular contacts with their mentors and were placed at month 12. The relationship between regular contacts between the cadets and mentors and placement outcomes was statistically significant ($\chi^2 =10.6$, $df = 1$), as shown in Table 9. Thus, regular contacts and youth placement outcomes are dependent on each other. The relationship between regular contact and each of the three specific types of placement outcomes – employment placement, education placement, and military placement – was tested at the .05 level. The relationship between regular contact and employment placement outcomes was *not* statistically significant ($\chi^2 =3.7$, $df = 1$). Therefore, regular contact and employment placement outcomes are independent of each other. The relationship between regular contact between the cadets and their mentors and education placement outcomes was *not* statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1.1$, $df = 1$). Thus, regular contact and education placement outcomes are independent of each other. The relationship between regular contact and military placement outcomes was *not* statistically significant ($\chi^2 =.03$, $df = 1$). Therefore, regular contact and military placement outcomes are independent of each other.

Table 9

Regular Contacts and Placement at Month 12 Among Cadets

Outcome	N	χ^2 (df)
Placement	77	10.6 (1)*
Type of Placement		
Employment	46	3.7 (1)
Education	20	1.1 (1)
Military	6	.03 (1)

* *p* < .001

Discussion

This study explored the relationship between having regular contacts with a mentor and having a placement outcome among at-risk youth. All the youths in this study were exposed to the same life skills training through the Youth Challe*NG*e Program at Carville, Louisiana, and were paired with a mentor that was chosen by the youth. This study found that placement outcomes among at-risk youth are associated with regular contact with a mentor. Findings of this study support the significance of youths having mentors and having positive life outcomes.

The findings of this study support the importance of regular contacts between an at-risk youth and a mentor and successful placement outcomes for the youth. The relationship between regular contact and placement outcomes was tested at the .001 level and was statistically significant. Therefore, regular contact between the youth and mentor and the youth's placement outcome are dependent upon each other. However, the relationship between regular contact and each of the placement outcomes – employment, education, and military – was not statistically significant.

Unique Contributions of Study

This study has several unique contributions. First, this study specifically examines the importance of regular contacts between the youth and his or her mentor. This is the first time that the mentoring aspect of YCP has been empirically examined. After the youth graduates from the residential phase, the mentor is responsible for providing the youth with support and encouragement. With the guidance of a mentor, approximately 80% of the graduates of the Youth Challe*NG*e Program at the Gillis W. Long Center in Carville, Louisiana, are successful in maintaining placement throughout the 12 months of the residential phase, even if they did not

have regular contact with the mentor. As a result, both the program and the youths are successful.

Second, the focus of this study is the influences that mentor have on the placement outcomes of the youths. Previous studies focused on other aspects of the program, the effect YCP had on graduates obtaining a high school diploma or GED and the likelihood of them being employed (DOE, 2010; Millenky *et al.*, 2011). While the program is influential in placement outcomes of the youths, regular contacts between the youths and mentors play an essential role in the youths' placement outcomes. Through subjecting this component of the program to empirical study for the first time, this study advances the field of youth services in an important way.

A third contribution of this study is that it was completed in Louisiana, and it was the first empirical study to evaluate YCP's mentoring program at the Gillis W. Long Center. Louisiana has three YCP sites, which is more than any other state in the United States. Previous studies regarding at-risk youth in Louisiana do not exist. This study fills that gap because it focuses solely on at-risk youth in Louisiana.

Limitations

First, the youth's monthly placement and the number of contacts with his or her mentor were self-reported by the youths. In trying to meet the regulations of the post-residential program, youths may not have been completely truthful. Second, this study could not account for the nature and quality of the relationship and/or the contacts between the youth and mentor. Third, the agency is only required to record two contacts between the youth and his or her mentor each month; therefore, three or more contacts are possible but are only recorded as two contacts for the month. Thus, dosage effect could not have been measured in a precise manner.

Fourth, if the cadet is not reached by a case manager in the post-residential department by the end of the month, the cadet is recorded as having no placement for the month when in fact the youth could have been placed and had regular contact with his or her mentor. Fifth, the present study could not control for selection bias such as the youth's motivation to succeed or resilient and risk factors. Youth's motivation, social skills, or risk factors may have affected the placement outcome as well as the nature and the quality of the relationship with mentors.

Implications for Social Work and Agency Practice

As previously stated, 1.3 million students drop out of school each year, which leads to unfavorable outcome for these youths (NGYF, 2012). To decrease the rate of high school dropout throughout the United States, school social workers can promote relationships between at-risk youths and identified mentors. Through pairing these youths with mentors and encouraging regular contact, the probability of them obtaining a high school degree or GED may increase. Also, social workers in schools can address the lack of support among at-risk youths. Providing at-risk youths with mentors and enforcing regular contact between the two can combat this lack of support.

One way that the Youth ChalleNGe Program could facilitate regular contact between the youth and mentor is by requiring the youth and mentor to keep a contact log. In this log, the youth and mentor would record the date of contact and the type of contact. If the contact is face-to-face, they should record the events or activities. The youth and mentor should also keep a record of the amount of time that they spend together each month. The youth's case manager at the agency should enforce the keeping of this record.

The findings of this study, that placement outcomes are dependent upon regular contact, are affirming for volunteering mentors. This shows that mentors play a vital role in the youths'

lives and that volunteering to mentor is not a waste of time. The mentors may also get a sense of fulfillment from the mentoring experience. The agency can use the findings of this study to stress to the volunteering mentors the importance of their roles as mentors.

The findings of this study are also important for the agency. It shows that YCP staff should greatly stress regular contact between the youth and mentor. Approximately 60% of the youths did not have regular contacts with their mentors, which should become a focus for program improvement. Also, the findings of this study should be shared with YCP staff to inform them of the importance of regular contact between the youths and their mentors.

As previously mentioned, previous studies did not observe the influence of mentors when conducting studies regarding the success of YCP graduates (DOE, 2010; Millenky *et al.*, 2011). This is the first time that any aspect of this program has been subjected to empirical examination at the local level. The findings reveal that the youths' having regular contact with their mentors is associated with placement outcomes for at-risk youth who attend YCP. The assumptions behind components of YCP and many other programs in the field of youth service should be subjected to empirical study. Future research may be further expanded to investigate the relationships between at-risk youths and their having regular contacts with mentors in relation to success in various aspects such as academic environments, social environments, employment placements, emotional well-being, and a decrease in drug involvement and incarceration. This knowledge of the influence that regular contacts with mentors have on at-risk youths can be used to develop other mentoring programs targeting positive youth outcomes.

Suggestions for Future Research

Some suggestions for future research on regular contacts and relationships between at-risk youths and mentors may be drawn from this study. First, researchers should investigate the

quality of relationships between the youth and his or her mentor. For example, the youth and his

or her mentor may have met the requirement of two contacts each month, but the quality of the

relationship and the contacts was not accounted for. The quality of the relationship between the

youth and the mentor is important because youths who feel closer to or have more support from a

mentor may be more likely to pursue positive life outcomes. Second, other factors that may have

affected the youth placement outcomes, such as the youth's motivation to succeed and the

youth's familial and other environments, should be explored. This information could be

obtained either through conducting interviews or distributing surveys with participants regarding

the youths' histories and future aspirations. In addition to having regular contact with his or her

mentor throughout the 12 months, the youth must be determined to be successful. Also, various

aspects of the youth's history, such as age, mental capability, mental illness, family income,

family composition, and resiliency, may affect the youth's placement opportunities. A carefully

designed multivariate analysis based on the resilience framework coupled with agency's

enhanced data collection is warranted.

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Vita

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