
Guides for the Journey:

**Supporting High-Risk Youth
with Paid Mentors and Counselors**

Thomas J. Smith

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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices.

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Introduction

In its October 2003 report, the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth strongly endorsed the principle that public resources must be concentrated on youth who are most seriously at risk. “These special target populations would be those who represent areas of serious concern, and who carry disproportionately negative consequences for youth and their communities if not addressed,” the report states, proposing specific segments of the youth population for priority attention.

But what approach to “priority attention” makes the most sense? One that has gained widespread acceptance and recognition is adult involvement through mentoring, counseling, teaching and coaching in a range of settings.

This paper explores the potential of a novel and emerging approach to increasing the level and quality of adult involvement with high-risk youth: extended contact with a paid mentor-counselor. A small number of programs where this approach is being tested and refined show considerable early promise, and encouraging track records are beginning to emerge.

The paid mentor-counselor is not currently in widespread use, and the potential of the strategy may not be, on the surface, clear or compelling. This paper describes how paid counselors work in practice, and how they effectively complement both the professional cadre and the unpaid volunteers who work with young people. It presents a rationale for the paid mentor-counselor, discusses how such programs can be implemented and suggests why they should attract the interest of policy-makers and funders.

Finding Targets:

High-Risk Segments of the Youth Population

Youth advocates are sometimes criticized for an overly broad conception of youth policy and programs. Insisting on comprehensive “systems” for meeting the needs of America’s young people, the critics argue, is inconsistent with our scarce public resources, with our lack of a coherent overall youth policy and with the broad national unease our society feels toward government social programs.

These concerns are not entirely without merit, but they deflect attention from a more chronic and serious issue—one whose importance even critics acknowledge. The U.S. youth population contains a relatively small number of youngsters who are at extremely high risk. These are youth facing likely failure in the labor market, early pregnancy, substance abuse, homelessness and serious involvement with the criminal justice system.

The presence of such high-risk youngsters, and the significant challenges they represent, are well known to the policy and practitioner communities. These youth do not constitute one well-defined or homogeneous group. Convincing estimates of their numbers are difficult to come by, and subject to both substantive and methodological disputes over how risk factors should be defined and measured. Still, there are indicators and data that quantify some key segments of the youth population, and these provide useful perspectives on the magnitude of the problem.

Foster care children and youth. More than 500,000 children and adolescents in the U.S. reside in “out-of-home care,” the technical term for protective placements of children in foster homes, group homes and residential centers. Youngsters from

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infancy to age 18 are included in this population, which has been steadily growing since the early 1980s. While the majority are younger children, a notable fraction are older: More than one fourth of the total are aged 11 to 15, and one fifth are 16 or older.

The young people in foster care face troubling challenges: histories of neglect, abuse and abandonment; disruptions in schooling; and the pain and anxiety of being separated from their families. And while family reunification is a key goal, many children remain in the system for long periods: The mean stay is 32 months.

Foster care teenagers often face the most acute challenges. They are less apt to be placed in family-style community foster care settings and more likely to be run-aways, school dropouts or delinquents. Absent suitable community placements, some of these youngsters are likely to end up in “restrictive” settings. Almost 100,000 young people spent time in residential treatment centers or group homes in 1999, and available evidence suggests that some fraction of them were there not because they needed that treatment, but because suitable community placements could not be found.

Youngsters in these residential settings are particularly vulnerable. Many are emotionally disturbed; they frequently have been physically abused, are prone to violent behavior and may have been involved with the criminal justice system. They often fare poorly in school, and are highly likely to engage in risky behaviors (substance use, for example, or unprotected sex). And they struggle to make successful transitions to the community (whether as “emancipated” young adults, or as placements in foster care or intensive-service settings).

The issue becomes starkly evident when these youth turn 18 and “age out” of the system—as almost 20,000 do each year. Their futures are shaky, as they leave the protective reach of public services and enter an independent existence. A national study of the foster care system conducted by Westat, Inc., suggests that youth’s prospects in this transition are quite poor:

- Thirty-eight percent of youth leaving foster care in 1988 were emotionally disturbed; half had used illegal drugs, and a fourth were involved with the criminal justice system.
- Only half had graduated from high school (compared to 85 percent of comparable non-foster-care youth).
- Two to four years after leaving, only 38 percent were working, and fewer than half held a full-time job—earning a median weekly salary of about \$200.¹

Clearly, as youth move through the foster care system and subsequently transition out of it, a significant proportion fail to find their way.

Homeless children and youth. While estimating the numbers of either adult or young homeless people remains controversial, there is strong consensus among local, state and federal officials that the problem is substantial and growing. A 2000 congressional report suggested that the population of homeless children and youth had increased 10 percent between 1997 and 2000, to more than 900,000; two thirds were in the age range from prekindergarten through grade six.

Though 87 percent of school-aged homeless children and youth are enrolled in school, only about 77 percent attend regularly, and only 15 percent of preschool-age homeless children are in preschool programs. Frequent moves, changes of schools and uncertain living conditions, as well as guardianship and other issues, undercut or reduce schooling time and increase the risk for family separation and abuse.

In addition, most studies concede that existing estimates of the numbers may be low, failing to account for teenagers who are not in shelters but are living with friends or other relatives. Significantly, an Urban Institute survey of homeless people in recognized shelters suggests that 4 percent of all homeless people may be “unaccompanied youth”—that is, youngsters in shelters but without families.²

Dropouts. Another high-risk group are the young people who drop out of school. Almost half a million leave annually; while many eventually return, a significant frac-

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tion (almost one sixth) fail to come back and finish. Alarming, only about a third of dropouts from low-income households ever get their degree.

The cumulative effects of this dynamic are alarming: There are roughly 400,000 young people in the U.S. who lack diplomas, are not in school and are not working. Among all 20- to 24-year-olds, whether working or not, some 2.3 million lack a diploma, greatly increasing their long-term propensity for joblessness and inactivity.

In 1996, the median annual earnings of young adults aged 25 to 34 who had not completed high school were more than 30 percent lower than peers who had finished, a gap that has been widening for more than 20 years. The diploma or GED no longer is an option in a competitive, fluid global economy—it is an essential prerequisite. Thus, youth who have left school without finishing constitute another natural target for concentrated efforts.

Youth in the juvenile justice system. About 80,000 18- to 19-year-olds are confined in federal and state prisons and local jails. An additional 125,000 young people 21 and under are held in residential placement facilities.

While many juvenile crime rates have been declining over the past decade, too many youth still come into contact with the juvenile (and adult) justice system. Indeed, one trend is particularly striking: Since 1987, the number of adjudicated cases that result in “out-of-home” placement, including restrictive settings, has risen by more than 50 percent—almost 160,000 juveniles face such placements each year.

The concern is that many of these placed youth will in time reenter the community—another critical transition process for another high-risk group. Reentry and after-care strategies for these young people have been a priority issue for federal policy-makers, who are supporting a number of national demonstration programs. Their concern is heightened by two factors: Juvenile placement costs are estimated to range from \$35,000 to \$60,000 per person per year, and the recidivism rate for serious youth offenders returning to the community without after-care services is roughly 50 percent.

Other high-risk target groups could be cited, but the broad point seems clear: A comparatively small number of young people create a great volume of social cost and disproportionately burden human service programs. One study estimates that, in present value terms, the societal savings that would result from diverting one career criminal would be roughly \$1.5 million; simply keeping a dropout in school would save almost \$400,000.³

Serving Adolescents:

The System and Its Limits

A variety of public systems and programs exist to meet the special needs of the nation's young people. Foster care, welfare, public health and juvenile justice are established, generally stable systems with a dependable source of funding, reflecting the nation's basic commitment to the well-being of children.

To a considerable degree, these systems are protective and custodial. Their major focus is younger children, and (with the exception of juvenile justice) they offer a far more limited amount of support and services to adolescents and young adults. Indeed, outside of schools, "adolescent" programs in most communities are piecemeal mixes of public resources and private/nonprofit organizations—the second-chance network. Public funding for the network is scattered and undependable (except, again, for justice programs), and the offerings vary widely in their aims and quality.

In part, this reflects a general societal belief that while young children may sometimes require special public intervention and protection, adolescents do not and are, in fact, quite adequately served by attendance in school. Unlike education or protective children's services, whose necessity and value are accepted, there is little public enthusiasm for extensive support systems for adolescents. The services that do exist have a strong local and voluntary flavor, depending as much or more on United Ways and local philanthropies as they do on public sources for support. Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters and a range of community organizations (such as the Police Athletic League) are the mainstay of the network.

These programs mostly emphasize recreation, education and jobs. The federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which funds employment-related programming, is among the few flexible sources of support for adolescent nonschool programs (though much of it actually is spent on programming for youth in school). And while WIA funding does target low-income youth, most of the programming is of short duration and not always concentrated on youth who are most seriously at risk.

Given the fragmented nature of these services, young people, especially those at serious risk, are all too likely to fall through the cracks. The network is underfunded, unsophisticated and unconnected. It has little capacity for keeping track of youngsters once they leave a program, and adolescents are a mobile and volatile group, complicating matters further. The larger issue is this: Even when "high-risk" adolescents are identified, few services are available to assist them, and fewer still can assist them for an extended period.

Involving Adults in Young People's Lives

Designing programs for young people is always likely to be as much a creative as a scientific process. Even granting that, more than two decades of research and evaluation have identified some basic principles that underpin successful programs and initiatives for youth. One on which both research and common sense strongly agree is that the presence of caring and committed adults can make a strong difference in young people's lives.

Plentiful anecdotal evidence attests to the enormous positive impact adults can have. Stories of teachers, neighbors, local store owners and coaches who connect with a youngster are a staple in the youth field. And the work of scholars such as Emmy Werner has provided convincing documentation that resilient youth—those who are able to survive trying and difficult events in their lives—often cite a connection with a caring adult as one factor in their success.⁴

In the early 1990s, a scientific evaluation of Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS), the program perhaps most widely known for bringing adults and needy youth together, yielded persuasive evidence that supported the widespread belief of youth practitioners: mentoring worked. Young people in mentoring relationships, the research demonstrated, were less likely to use drugs and fight, more likely to attend and do better in school, and more likely to get along with peers and family members.⁵

Complementary evidence from other programs that concentrate on the adult connection, though still limited and preliminary, is beginning to extend

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the findings from the BBBS study. The Quantum Opportunities Program, whose centerpiece was an extended connection between an adult counselor and poor adolescents, produced strong evidence of increasing high school completion.

The WAY (Work Appreciation for Youth) scholarship program, operated for 20 years by Children's Village in New York, has also produced strong findings. Its focus is one of the most difficult segments of the youth population—young people who have spent time in residential treatment centers (RTCs). The WAY program pairs paid adult mentor-counselors with young people for an extended period—up to five years—to ensure that the youth will have support throughout their transition to young adulthood.

Another program on the West Coast, Friends of the Children, has begun testing a similar approach with very young children who have problems sustaining social and other relationships and who are prone to being disruptive in school. The keystone of the program is a paid counselor who is committed to working with a group of these children for up to 12 years.

These programs are discussed in more detail below. It should be noted that interventions of this kind are still comparatively modest in number and scale. They take their place among interventions for young people built on interaction with paid, trained professionals—teachers, social workers, foster care workers and juvenile justice staff. But they also share key elements with programs that rely heavily on adult volunteers, who supplement program activities or who—in the case of BBBS—actually constitute the core of the “intervention.”

The paid mentor-counselor reflects the unique value of a “middle ground” in the youth arena: concerned and caring adults who befriend and support young people and seek to guide and mentor them, but who occupy paid positions. They are committed to staying with young people over considerable periods of time (up to 12 years). Indeed, the longevity of their connection appears to be one key to the early evidence of success that programs of this kind are producing.

Connecting High-Risk Adolescents with Adults

Programs and public systems that interact the most with high-risk youth have clearly relied on two “models” of adult interaction, both of them necessary and important. The first model relies on a professional cadre of social workers, institutional caregivers, probation officers and counselors. The second involves volunteers, who may be mentors (as in the case of Big Brothers Big Sisters) or may serve as informal counselors or recreational aides or in other ancillary roles.

Professionals. Trained social workers and other professional staff are critical components of youth-serving institutions. Their value lies in their training, their capacity to assess the strengths and needs of young people, their knowledge of how to intervene successfully and their ability to connect young people to services and resources.

Social workers with clinical training can recognize problems young people are experiencing, develop sound plans to guide and assist them and often serve in a therapeutic capacity. Many public institutions have established standards for the background and qualifications of the staff they employ, ensuring a minimum level of credentials and skills.

These skills are crucial when working with extremely high-risk groups: youth with serious emotional problems, youth who have been removed from their homes or youth who have entered the criminal justice system. Professionals can establish strong, supportive connections to young people, and in the ideal case, they can also build rapport and trust while carrying out their formal duties.

Nonetheless, the professional staff person’s potential to maintain a relationship has inherent limitations. First, he or she typically maintains a large caseload, which curtails opportunities to interact closely with any one young person. Second, professionals have obligations to the public systems that employ them—obligations that may not coincide with the felt needs and desires of the youngsters they serve.

Foster care workers, for example, must often decide on removal from a family or on a restrictive placement for a troubled youth. Probation officials have a built-in monitoring function and an obligation to report infractions, which go against the grain of establishing a trusting relationship. Such professionals may find their compassionate aims compromised by their role as representatives of “the system.”

The larger reality is that public helping agencies are chronically underfunded, and the adults who work in them are a scarce commodity. Extended personal contact between a professional adult and a young person is thus the exception and not the rule. While support and caring are formal goals in these settings, the result may prove far more mechanical. At their worst, these adult connections end up being purely utilitarian and of fairly short duration. Rather than affording an opportunity to provide support and guidance to a young person badly in need of them, these interactions may end up prompting indifference and suspicion, reinforcing the notion that adults are not to be trusted.

Volunteers. For most nonprofits and community organizations that work with high-risk youth, volunteers are a vital complement to their paid staff. Program funding in these organizations is even more limited than in the public systems, and staff are usually spread thin. Volunteer workers bridge the gap and enrich the service environment.

The rationale for volunteers is strong and straightforward. They are there because they want to be: They come to organizations out of natural interest, compassion and willingness to help, and in many cases they are willing to make significant time commitments. Big Brothers Big Sisters, for example, expects mentor-volunteers to serve for up to a year and stipulates minimum contact hours that mentors are required to meet.

While volunteers in some settings bring specialized knowledge and skills, only the willingness to spend time with a young person and the ability to be accepting and constructive are important in youth-serving programs. Adults from a wide variety of backgrounds can make significant contributions. Volunteers are a low-cost way of supplementing and humanizing the services these programs provide.

But the benefits are not automatic or without their share of special challenges. Volunteers are free to come and go. Well-structured programs like BBBS carefully screen volunteers up front, make expectations clear and provide ongoing support to the mentor-volunteer; most others are far less systematic.

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One crucial risk in such settings is that an adult volunteer may leave suddenly, aborting a relationship with a troubled young person and generating resentment rather than trust. Another limitation is that adults are often reluctant to volunteer when the challenges are greatest. Early findings from one project that pairs adult volunteers from faith-based institutions with criminally involved youth found that for every 100 adults approached about mentoring, only one was willing to take on a young person with that background. In the context of high-risk youth, then, there are natural limits to the volunteer base that can be drawn upon.

Even when volunteers are willing and well-intentioned, they may prove ill-equipped to provide the kind of acceptance and support young people most benefit from. Research has established that adults whose approach to youth relationships is developmental and nonjudgmental are far more likely to succeed than those who are more authoritarian and less flexible. This challenge can be particularly acute when dealing with older adolescents from high-risk groups. Establishing relationships with them requires a high degree of patience, acceptance, openness and perceptiveness, which even the best-intentioned adult may find difficult to sustain.

Training and support for the volunteer adults can go far in enhancing their capabilities. However, volunteer management—the careful recruitment, screening, orientation, placement and support of the adults who desire to serve—is all too frequently neglected in the nonprofit world. Volunteers are a low-cost way to enhance service, but for them to be used most effectively, there must be a commitment of staff time and resources, one that is too seldom made in the youth field.

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Middle Ground: Paid Mentor-Counselors

The idea of the paid counselor or mentor is relatively recent. The principal—if not sole—task of this person is to interact with young people, without pursuing a narrowly framed therapeutic or programmatic goal, and to provide support, company, encouragement and advice, largely on the youngster's terms.

The mentor-counselor is an advocate for the young person, and without officially representing formal public systems, they can assist the youngster in navigating the often opaque realm of public services. More importantly, the counselor can provide continuity for young people in transition, helping ensure that young people do not vanish if they encounter challenges or problems in a new setting and supporting the young person if a crisis does occur.

The Children's Village WAY program is one of the most clear-cut and best-documented examples of this approach. The program combines work, a regimen of progressively increasing responsibility and the presence of the WAY counselor to help adolescent youth in residential treatment centers succeed in making the transition to the community.

The impetus for the program was recognition that these young people are acutely at risk. As a group, they face enormous difficulties: prior physical and sexual abuse, poor school performance, emotional problems and involvement with the criminal justice system.

WAY's creators also were aware of a common aggravating factor: Youth leaving RTCs often returned to family settings that had little stability—settings that might themselves be a source of future problems

and that might prompt the youth to seek other living arrangements or run away. Others who were old enough might try to live independently, often staying with friends or relatives while searching for suitable housing and employment. The mobility of these youth complicated the task of successfully supporting them as they moved out of restrictive living situations.

One critical role that WAY's adult mentor-counselors play, then, is providing continuity of contact and support. Their assignment is to stay connected with youth for up to five years after discharge from the Children's Village site—long enough to see youngsters past the most difficult hurdles they must face in reorienting to the community, finding a settled living arrangement, completing school and preparing for or finding work.

The WAY counselor can, in effect, move with those young people who are physically in transition—changing living arrangements or schools, for example—and can provide help, encouragement and guidance during these periods. They can also advocate on behalf of the youth, especially in difficult or crisis periods when they may need additional services or assistance.

An evaluation of the WAY program has provided evidence that the strategy is a workable and effective one. Youngsters maintain their connection to the mentor-counselor. More importantly, the program produces results: 80 percent of WAY youth finish high school, and in a longitudinal study, WAY youth were found to have lower rates of criminal involvement than those in a comparison group.⁶

Somewhat similar in approach, the Quantum Opportunities Project (QOP), operated by the Opportunities Industrialization Centers of America (OIC-A), assigned adult counselors to a group of low-income adolescents entering high school, all of whom were in families receiving welfare at the time of entry.

“Once in QOP, always in QOP” was the rallying cry of program managers, whose goal was to keep adult counselors connected to the young people, meeting with them regularly throughout four years of high school and encouraging them to finish. A small random assignment study of the program produced striking results: Half the control group members failed to finish high school, compared to only about a fourth of QOP participants.

Another recent initiative centered on a paid mentor-counselor is Friends of the Children (FOTC), a program started with private funds in Oregon in 1993. FOTC’s purpose is to assist children who are profoundly at risk of failing in life. The program seeks to identify these children early, selecting them in the first and second grades. FOTC is unusual in that it concentrates on children at highest risk: children from homes characterized by substance abuse, poverty, instability, neglect, mental and physical health problems, and physical abuse.

The paid mentor—“Friend” is the program’s term and its intent—connects with the children before negative behavior becomes deeply rooted and when they are most open to positive influences. The Friend supports children throughout the crucial transitions from child to teenager to young adult. The program’s design is

for a Friend to remain with each child for up to 12 years—through high school, and perhaps into college.

Though research on the program is in its early stages, FOTC shows considerable promise: Attrition rates among participating children and Friends have been remarkably low over several years. Public school officials have been extremely cooperative in helping to identify the young people. And FOTC has grown (about 600 children are now involved) and attracted more and more funding sources. Government agencies, in particular, have begun to recognize that investments in a program like FOTC can yield huge public savings over time.

Indeed, all three of the initiatives described here have begun to expand to other locales, in all cases with support from the public sector (including the federal government). While the paid mentor-counselor has not yet achieved widespread recognition, it has, where designed and operated soundly, achieved recognition as a strategy with abundant potential.

Strengths and Challenges

The tasks of identifying, hiring and managing the paid mentor-counselors are similar in many ways to traditional staffing. The desirable qualifications and skill set are, of course, somewhat distinctive.

Rather than specific training, the most important qualities are personal: an adult with a sincere interest in working with young people, who can be flexible, patient, understanding and resilient (able to handle not-infrequent suspiciousness in the early stages). The mentor-counselor must also be a positive role model, and most of all, he or she must be attuned to the youth's own perspectives and priorities.

Not surprisingly, former teachers are frequently attracted to the position. Indeed, FOTC establishes salary levels for Friends somewhere near the starting salary for teachers (about \$30,000); WAY's salary range is similar. Compensation levels are an issue, since a balance must be struck between keeping costs reasonable and being able to attract and retain effective people.

Both training and support are essential in deploying mentor-counselors. It is one of the strengths of the approach that these can be carefully tailored to the young people with whom relationships will be established. FOTC's focus is younger children, and in both selecting staff and preparing them, the special developmental attributes of this age-group can be emphasized. Similarly, WAY can train its counselors to recognize and cope with the typical problems and challenges that adolescents generally, and institutionalized youth in particular, present. And they can thus better support these youngsters when issues and challenges arise.

Of course the special strength of these interventions is that they can be as mobile as the children and youth. Younger children—especially those in poor and troubled families—are apt to move and change schools often. Adolescents, especially the high-risk youth of concern here, are equally likely to be on the move. Mentor-counselors by design go where the young people are. They ensure some degree of continuity in their lives, and can quickly seek out added help and support if a crisis occurs.

Mentor-counselors typically work with a modest-sized group of children; keeping the numbers manageable is important to the intervention's success. WAY's ideal is 15 to 20 youngsters per adult, though in practice, chiefly because of funding limitations, the ratio trends upward to 22. FOTC, intended as a more intensive intervention, maintains an eight-to-one ratio, and has specified minimum hours per month that Friends are expected to spend with each child.

While many strengths are inherent in the paid mentor-counselor approach, there remain a number of important challenges that need to be refined and resolved. All these programs stress an extended connection between adult and youngster. Indeed, there are strong indications derived from the research on adult-youth relationships that some threshold level of "intensity" (frequency of contact) and duration are important. However, existing knowledge is far from complete, so it is difficult to establish definitive practice standards. This particularly holds true for programs that work with adolescents (rather than younger children), where the research base is thinnest. While it seems

plausible to argue for extended contact, more limited (and, of course, less costly) approaches may yield substantial benefits. One study, of a program matching trained volunteers with juvenile offenders in Detroit, showed large reductions in recidivism rates with adult contact averaging only about 50 hours.

A larger issue, of course, is that hard “effectiveness” evidence is thus far quite limited. Only one random assignment study has been conducted (on QOP), and the small numbers and homogeneous sample are a drawback, despite the strong positive findings. Since these are long-term programs with a range of potential outcomes, convincing evaluations are difficult to design and costly to carry out.

Absent definitive evidence, of course, it is hard to make the persuasive case for paid mentor-counselors. And it has not proved easy, in many instances, to persuade public funders of the potential value of this kind of service strategy. In good part this may reflect understandable prudence and skepticism: Why, after all, should public funds be invested simply to provide “friends” for young people?

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Why Invest? The Policy Challenge

Human and social services expenditures are not generally regarded as “investments” but rather as costs and expenses. As a consequence, the strategic perspective normally associated with investment—Will the return down the road justify the outlay of resources now?—is seldom applied, or at least not applied with seriousness.

Put another way, the public sector’s response to pressing social needs has largely been framed in terms of current, short-term expenses and not longer-term effects. In part, this perspective is understandable. Current outlays are tangible and can be readily counted and observed; long-term benefits, on the other hand, are calculated only by complicated cost-benefit analyses, which are invariably subject to disputes regarding assumptions, time lines and outcomes that often are conjectural and imputed rather than measured and precise.

The current operational structure of federal and state government—multiple agencies frequently dealing with similar, overlapping issues—complicates the task of finding coherent approaches to complex social issues. In the youth arena, for example, the mind-set of “cost-shifting” frequently emerges.

Most public systems (including foster care, job training, education and family services) do not bear the final costs of a problem and can pass them on to another system without expending resources. The first agency fails to invest at all, or resists supplying enough resources to remedy a problem for which it will not bear ultimate responsibility. Only the criminal

justice system assumes “final” costs for unsolved social issues, a point to be revisited below.

Education, for example, is a large public entity that concentrates on youth in school—but not on school-age youth. School dropouts generally fall outside education’s circle of concern because, in the end, a school system’s performance will be judged not on youngsters who have left, but rather on those who remain. Likewise, the problems of young people who struggle as they age out of foster care are largely borne by program networks or systems other than the foster care system itself—such as job training, TANF and housing programs.

It frequently is argued that, absent better coordinated efforts, individual public agencies end up spending more on short-term “fixes” than they would if they joined forces in programming and resource deployment. The fragmented structure of government agencies at all levels largely precludes this happening. And so a given level of spending, focused on limited, stopgap programming, produces less than it could.

Promising strategies that require larger investments and depend on a longer time period for their effectiveness are seldom found in the social program world. Exceptions, such as the federally operated Job Corps, are typically programs of long standing that have been intensively researched and have produced convincing positive results—particularly impact findings from random assignment studies.

The mentor-counselor approach, still relatively new and with limited “impact” data from random assignment research, is thus at a disadvantage. It seeks to find a place in an environment that is reluctant to serve adolescents, that focuses on the short term, that struggles to coordinate its efforts in response to sustained and serious problems, and that—particularly in the last decade—has come to stress accountability and hard results.

Yet the rationale for this new approach is persuasive, on several counts. First, even if the definitive research studies have not yet been conducted, these programs have together produced an intriguing and positive track record. All have shown on-the-ground capacity to be implemented effectively, keeping youth and mentor-counselors in place over long periods. Initiatives such as the WAY program and the Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP) have in fact produced positive comparison findings. These may be limited in some cases, but they point the way to an approach with real promise. That promise, regrettably, cannot be claimed for many other initiatives in the youth field.

A second argument for more widespread use of mentor-counselors is simply this: So many other attempts to intervene successfully with high-risk young people have failed. The message of the programs cited above, combined with earlier research on Big Brothers Big Sisters, is that sustained adult contact has real potential as a program strategy and can be furnished at moderate cost.

From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, federal and state expenditures for operating costs of adult prisons more than tripled. Officials are beginning to seek preventive strategies that head off imprisonment and lower recidivism rates.

A third argument, less specific but perhaps far more potent, is this: The expense of imprisoning people is approaching a crisis level. Incarceration, which for the past decade has been the policy of choice for combating both juvenile and adult crime, is increasingly showing its less appealing side: high short-term costs, high long-term costs and little abatement of the underlying problems the strategy is intended to address.

From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, federal and state expenditures for operating costs of adult prisons more than tripled (to more than \$20 billion) when measured in constant dollars. And the upward trend is continuing: Since the mid-1990s, the number of prisoners in the U.S. has grown by more than a third.

The cost spiral has led to mounting concern, particularly among officials at the state level, where almost 90 percent of the expenses occur. These officials are beginning to seek preventive strategies that head off imprisonment and lower recidivism rates. A major intervention target should be the high-risk adolescents and children who, with disproportionate frequency, find their way into the criminal justice system and into prisons.

An Evolutionary Future

The natural inertia of the public sector and its fragmented structure and short-term orientation make it unlikely that changes in thinking and practice will come about quickly. In particular, it will be a challenge to persuade human service agencies working with chronically limited budgets to invest in a strategy like the paid mentor-counselor, which is preventive and long-term in nature.

The core strength of programs built around the paid mentor-counselor is that they work “on the ground” and are beginning to produce concrete evidence of their effectiveness. Their limitation, at present, is that they are few in number. One task, then, should be to continue the replication of those programs currently operating. As noted, WAY, Quantum Opportunities and Friends of the Children have all moved to a replication phase.

These replication efforts need to be carefully planned. Wherever possible, leaders should recruit sound replication partners with proven capacity to implement programs effectively. The risk of “implementation failure” can never be eliminated, but it can and should be minimized as much as possible. Success in replication will go a long way toward convincing policy-makers and funders, particularly public sector funders, that the mentor-counselor approach should be supported.

Likewise, careful objective research should be built into these efforts. Stronger and more complete evidence that the mentor-counselor can bring about results—school attachment, lower criminal involvement, sustained employment, lower recidivism rates—will be the single most powerful factor in spurring wider adoption of the

strategy. In particular, it will be important to establish the effectiveness of the approach in dealing with diverse age-groups and with high-risk segments of the youth population—dropouts, foster care youth and criminally involved young people.

Even though the public sector is the eventual target, it will require the philanthropic community’s support to achieve the twin goals of expansion and evaluation. Foundations and private funders represent the best source of flexible funding for new programs. In addition, their commitment and involvement can often help to leverage the attention and involvement of the public sector.

None of this is a guarantee of success. But the paid mentor-counselor is uniquely capable of complementing existing programs, concentrating on the young people who most need support and increasing their chances of success. The limited funding available for human service programs—for youth in particular—means that programs that target critical high-risk youngsters will assume increasing importance. As the mentor-counselor approach spreads successfully, it is certain to garner the support and acceptance it deserves.

Endnotes

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- 5 Tierney, Joseph P., and Jean Baldwin Grossman, with Nancy L. Resch. *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*. (Philadelphia, Public/Private Ventures, 1995).
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