

# Mentoring Program Enhancements Supporting Effective Mentoring of Children of Incarcerated Parents

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## Highlights

- Few mentoring programs implement specialized enhancements to better serve COIP.
- Among COIP, those whose programs have specialized mentor training have longer and stronger matches.
- Among COIP, those whose programs have additional funding for COIP have longer and stronger matches.
- Among COIP, those whose programs have specific goals for COIP have higher educational expectations.

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**Abstract** Children of incarcerated parents (COIP) are at risk for a range of negative outcomes; however, participating in a mentoring relationship can be a promising intervention for these youth. This study examined the impact of mentoring and mentoring program enhancements on COIP. Secondary data analyses were conducted on an archival database consisting of 70,729 matches from 216 Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) local agencies to establish the differential effects of mentoring on COIP. A subset of 45 BBBS agencies, representing 25,252 matches, participated in a telephone interview about program enhancements for better serving COIP. Results revealed that enhanced program practices, including having specific program goals, providing specialized mentor training, and receiving additional funding resulted in better outcomes for COIP matches. Specifically, specialized mentor training and receiving additional funding for serving matches containing COIP were associated with longer and stronger matches. Having specific goals for serving COIP was associated with higher educational expectations in COIP. Results are discussed in terms of benefits of a relationship-based intervention for addressing the needs of COIP and suggestions for program improvements when mentoring programs are serving this unique population of youth.

**Keywords** Mentoring · Mentor training · Children of prisoners · Children of incarcerated parents · Match length

## Introduction

The incarceration rate in the U.S. has quadrupled over the past 40 years, resulting in nearly 1 in 100 adults (2.2 million) in jail or prison. Since over half of prisoners (53%) are the parents of minors, this dramatic increase in incarceration has profoundly affected a generation of families and children (Nickel, Garland, & Kane, 2009). A staggering 1 in 40 children in the U.S. are estimated to have a parent in a prison or jail (Wildeman, 2009), with over half of those children under 10 years old (Nickel et al., 2009).

## Effects of Parental Incarceration

Children of incarcerated parents (COIP) can face a host of co-occurring difficulties that put them at risk for poor developmental outcomes, largely because a parent's incarceration rarely signals the beginning of a child's challenges (Travis & Waul, 2003). In many cases, the family instability (e.g., disrupted living arrangements; Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, & Mincy, 2009), stigmatization (e.g., feelings of shame and embarrassment; Beckerman, 1997), and stress (e.g., loss of income; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008) associated with parental arrest and imprisonment have already exposed COIP to a multitude of challenges (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003).

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## Child Outcomes Associated with Parental Incarceration

Studies of incarcerated families are often affected by methodological limitations, including reliance on convenience samples and limited longitudinal data, and most studies focus on paternal incarceration (National Research Council, 2014). Nonetheless, a robust and growing literature has pointed to a range of negative associations between parental incarceration and youth outcomes. The most commonly cited effects of parental incarceration are externalizing problems and antisocial behavior, including conduct disorder, non-compliance, aggression, and minor delinquency (Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012; Murray, Farrington, Sekol, & Olsen, 2009). These early externalizing behaviors are highly connected with later problems, such as adult criminality (Van de Rakt, Murray, & Nieuwebeerta, 2012). However, there is mixed evidence for negative effects related to mental health problems, drug use, or poor educational performance for COIP. Using a meta-analytic approach, Murray et al. (2012) did not find evidence for increased risk in these areas, but a growing literature related to adverse childhood events (ACE), which includes parental incarceration, links ACE to increased risk of attempted suicide (Dube et al., 2001), early smoking initiation and later heavy smoking (Anda et al. (1999), and later alcoholism and depression (Anda et al., 2002). Other internalizing problems (e.g., low self-esteem, depression) are also common among COIP (National Research Council, 2014; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). These internalizing problems, in turn, are associated with a range of stress-related health problems such as asthma, nervous disorders, sleeplessness, and malnourishment (Gordon, Iglesias, Semeshenko, & Nadal, 2009).

## How Mentoring can Impact or Mitigate Negative Outcomes in COIP

Non-parental adults can provide vital support to caregivers and children of prisoners (Shlafer, Poehlmann, Coffino, & Hanneman, 2009). Specifically, participating in a mentoring program has been associated with a wide array of positive effects for youth at high risk for poor outcomes, including reduced symptoms of depression and improved social, academic, and behavioral adjustment (Herrera, DuBois, & Grossman, 2013; Tolan, Henry, Schoeny, Lovegrove, & Nichols, 2014). These effects are particularly evident when mentoring relationships are high quality and enduring (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012), when children lack strong relationships with other adults (Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, & Herrera, 2011), and when children are at both individual and environmental risk (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011).

Multiple local, state, and federal initiatives have recognized the needs of this at-risk population of youth and have provided funding to support the development of specialized mentoring programs implementing enhanced program practices to serve them. For example, in the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments, Congress authorized the Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program (2002) that subsequently provided more than \$360 million to establish or expand mentoring programs serving COIP, until the program was discontinued in 2011 (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017). Despite the surge in government funding for mentoring programs serving COIP, few relatively small studies were located that have evaluated program effectiveness for mentoring of this high-risk population of youth.

The first major effort to offer enhanced mentoring services to COIP was the Amachi program, a partnership among Public/Private Ventures, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), and the Penn Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society. The program recruited volunteers from Philadelphia church congregations to be matched with local children in BBBS programs (Jucovy, 2003). In a 3-year, three-site implementation of the Amachi mentoring program, a randomized controlled trial evaluation revealed improvements in short-term outcomes, such as having a higher self-worth and sense of the future, particularly among youth participating in more enduring mentoring relationships (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). Successful matches were further defined by mentor consistency and commitment.

In a second evaluation, the Mentoring Connections Program, a program designed to serve COIP between the ages of 4 and 16, about one-third of matches ended prematurely in the first 6 months. Mentees in matches that did not end early, however, exhibited fewer internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Shlafer et al., 2009).

More recently, Kupersmidt, Stump, Stelter, and Rhodes (2017a) examined a large national dataset of diverse mentoring programs to examine risk factors for premature match closure and found that COIP were significantly more likely to be in early terminating relationships compared to children who did not have an incarcerated parent. Many factors may contribute to the challenges encountered in mentoring relationships involving COIP. For example, caregiver incarceration can result in increased stress on and needs of the custodial caregiver (Denby, 2012; Turanovic, Rodriguez, & Pratt, 2012) which can, in turn, negatively impact the ability of the custodial caregiver to support the mentoring relationship. Taken together, these findings suggest that, although mentoring may have a positive impact on COIP youth, these youth may be less likely to benefit from the effects of mentoring because their relationships are more likely to close

unexpectedly. In fact, COIP youth may experience negative consequences of mentoring if their matches close prematurely, because early match termination can be particularly detrimental to the socioemotional development of youth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).

In the present study, we examined a large national, archival database for BBBSA that included one-to-one mentoring matches of COIP as well as matches of youth who did not have an incarcerated parent (non-COIP). Although the dataset did not include random assignment of youth to conditions of receiving mentoring versus not receiving mentoring, we were able to examine the relative impact of mentoring on COIP compared to a diverse group of non-COIP.

### Impact of Moderators of Mentoring on COIP

DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002) conducted a meta-analytic review of the effectiveness of mentoring programs and concluded that youth from disadvantaged backgrounds who experienced environmental risk were most likely to benefit from mentoring. At the same time, such risk factors can contribute to shorter, less satisfying matches with potentially iatrogenic effects on at-risk youth who have pre-existing personal vulnerabilities (Rhodes & Spencer, 2010).

These findings call attention to the need for enhanced program practices designed to serve COIP. As described above, many COIP have been exposed to family and environmental stressors, as well as other traumatic experiences. Such youth may be less inclined to trust the overtures of caring adults (Shlafer et al., 2009). Indeed, because mentoring is essentially a relationship-based intervention, it can ignite vulnerabilities and elicit behavioral patterns that were previously established in their bonds with their incarcerated parent. With implementation of high-quality practices and appropriate program enhancements, however, staff and volunteer mentors can be better equipped to meet the relational and behavioral challenges posed by youth in special populations such as COIP (Kupersmidt & Rhodes, 2013; Kupersmidt, Stump, Stelter, & Rhodes, 2017b).

Three program enhancements were examined in the present study. The first enhancement involved having specific goals for matches involving COIP. Establishing goals directly related to the challenges of mentoring this population displays a more intentional approach to mentoring and may aid mentoring programs in identifying some of the unique problems and challenges faced by COIP. Furthermore, in order to serve this high-risk group of youth best, mentoring programs need to articulate, define, and codify their policies and procedures to provide uniformly high-quality services to matches. Notably, mentors in matches with COIP reported that mentoring

program staff members often interpret rules and procedures differently from one another resulting in ambiguity and confusion (Merenstein, Tyson, Tilles, Keays, & Ruffolo, 2011). Notably, mentoring programs that have a clearly articulated model, and employ theory-based and empirically based practices have better outcomes than programs that do not (DuBois et al., 2002).

The second enhancement explored in this study was whether the program sought and received additional funding for serving their matches that included COIP. Given the array of challenges faced by COIP, mentors, mentees, and parents may need more intensive support, which can be time-consuming and costly. Increased match support services might result in programs needing to employ more staff members in order to manage lower caseloads of matches effectively. In one qualitative study of mentors volunteering with COIP, mentors reported that they needed frequent support, even weekly contacts, particularly during the early months of their matches (Merenstein et al., 2011). This frequency of contact is notably greater than the frequency required in the Monitoring and Support Standard for mentoring programs (i.e., two times in the first month and monthly, thereafter; MENTOR, 2015). Supplemental funding specifically utilized to serve the COIP population could provide additional and much-needed resources to provide adequate support to matches involving high-risk youth.

The third enhancement involved providing additional, specialized training to mentors in mentoring relationships with COIP. In a qualitative study of mentoring COIP, mentors reported that the pre-match training that they received was insufficient (Merenstein et al., 2011). However, pre-match mentor training of adequate duration, quality, and content has been associated with longer matches (Kupersmidt, Stump, Stelter, & Rhodes, 2017b). Adequately trained mentors are more knowledgeable about mentoring, have greater clarity about relationship boundaries, better understand the roles necessary to be effective mentors, and feel more prepared to be in a mentoring relationship (Kupersmidt, Stelter, Rhodes, & Stump, 2017).

Taken together, we hypothesized that programs that reported implementing the three enhanced program practices of specialized goals, funding, and training would have COIP mentees and matches with better outcomes.

## Method

### Participants

Archival match and outcome data from 70,729 youth and matches across 216 BBBS programs were drawn from Agency Information Management (AIM), the organization's national data management system. Analyses from

the full archive included those with complete data on all covariates and outcomes. Approximately, 19% of the mentees from the full archive had a parent who has been incarcerated. Mentees had completed outcome measures before the match began and again at 1 year after the match began (for community-based matches) or at the end of the school year (for site- or school-based matches). Mentors completed strength of relationship measures approximately 3 months after the match began and again at 1 year after the match began or at the end of the school year, depending on whether the match was community-based or site-based.

A subset of BBBS programs from the larger AIM archive were identified for purposes of participating in a survey and interview related to program practices. Participants in this study included executive directors or other management-level staff from 45 BBBS local agencies located in 28 states in the United States. The majority of the participating staff members were women ( $n = 41$ ; 91%), White ( $n = 36$ ; 82%), in their 40s (mean age of 42, range from 24 to 65), and had been employed at their agency for an average of 13.5 years (range from 1.5 to 40 years).

Participating programs ranged in size from having fewer than 15 matches in their archival dataset to more than 5,000 (mean program size = 561.16,  $SD = 803.73$ ). Of those matches, 19.36% included a youth with a parent who has been incarcerated. All matches were one-to-one relationships, with 55.05% taking place in community-based settings and 44.95% taking place in school- or site-based settings. Data from the matches were entered into the AIM data management system between October 1, 2004 and March 30, 2013. Analyses from the participating program subset data included those with complete data on all covariates and outcomes.

## Measures

### Archival AIM Data—Child and Parent Report

*Demographic characteristics.* Mentee demographic information such as sex, race, ethnicity, and age at the start of the match was included in the archival dataset. Other background information such as child living situation (e.g., foster care, two-parent home, single mother home), a 16-point scale of annual family income level (1 = *Less than \$10,000*; 16 = *\$200,000 or more*), and subsidized lunch status was also included in the archive. All demographic and background information was provided by parents and collected by BBBS staff when families applied to be part of the program. Race and ethnicity were coded as two dichotomous variables indicating White versus non-White and non-Hispanic versus Hispanic, respectively. Child age was mean-centered at 11.59 years.

*Youth social acceptance.* Mentee-reported social acceptance was measured using a six-item scale with questions relating to how they felt about themselves and their relationships with their peers (e.g., I am always doing things with lots of kids). Youth responded using a four-point Likert scale (1 = *Not at all true*; 4 = *Very true*). Three items were reverse-scored such that higher values on the scale represent higher social acceptance scores. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .69 at baseline.

*Youth scholastic competence.* Mentee-reported scholastic competence was measured using a six-item scale with questions related to perceived academic achievement (e.g., I am very good at my school work). Youth responded using a four-point Likert scale (1 = *Not at all true*; 4 = *Very true*). Three items were reverse-scored such that higher values on the scale represent greater scholastic competence. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .72 at baseline.

*Youth educational expectations.* Mentee-reported educational expectations were measured using a three-item scale with questions related to their level of certainty about continuing their education and accomplishing their educational goals (e.g., How sure are you that you will finish high school?). Youth responded using a four-point Likert scale (1 = *Not at all sure*; 4 = *Very sure*). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .85 at baseline.

*Youth grades.* Mentees reported on how well they were doing in school using a four-item, four-point Likert scale (e.g., How are you doing in mathematics?: 1 = *Not at all good*, 5 = *Excellent*). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .70 at baseline.

*Youth school attendance.* Mentees reported how often they had been absent from school in the past 30 days and how often they had been late for school in the past 30 days using a four-point Likert scale (1 = *Hardly ever*, 4 = *Pretty often*). Both items were reverse-scored such that higher values on the scale represent higher school attendance. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .53 at baseline.

*Youth parental trust.* Mentees responded to three items related to their relationship with their parent (e.g., My parent accepts me as I am.). If mentees lived with both parents, they were asked to respond to the questions based on their relationship with the parent or guardian to whom they felt closest. Responses were on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *Hardly ever*, 4 = *Pretty often*). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .76 at baseline.

### Archival AIM Data—Mentor Report

*Demographic characteristics.* Mentor demographic information such as sex, race, ethnicity, and age at the start of the match was included in the archival dataset. Other background information such as marital status, education level, and profession was also included in the archive. Professions were coded into a dichotomous



variable indicating a non-helping profession versus a helping profession, with helping professions including childcare or day care worker, clergy, education, human services, human resources, medical services, and coaching or personal training. All demographic and background information was collected by BBBS staff when mentors applied to be part of the program. Race and ethnicity were coded as two dichotomous variables indicating White versus non-White and non-Hispanic versus Hispanic, respectively. Volunteer age was mean-centered at 30.77 years.

*Mentor strength of relationship.* The Mentor Strength of Relationship Survey is a 14-item scale measuring the mentor's feeling about their mentoring relationship (e.g., I feel close to my Little). Mentors respond on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*) and eight items were reverse-scored such that higher values on the scale denote stronger relationships. Mentors completed the strength of relationship survey toward the beginning of the match (3 months after the match began) and either 1 year after the start of the match (for community-based matches) or at the end of the mentee's school year (for site- or school-based matches). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .85 at the 3-month time point.

#### *Archival AIM Data—Staff Report*

*Match relationship length.* Relationship length information was calculated based upon agency archival records of the start date and end date of each match. All analyses were conducted on matches that had already closed. Approximately 71% of the matches in the dataset were closed.

*Interview about implementation of program enhancements to support matches involving COIP.* Enhancements to mentoring programs serving COIP were assessed via a telephone interview conducted with BBBS program staff members, in addition to other questions not relevant to the current study. Program staff members were asked what their programs were doing specifically to address problems or challenges faced by COIP. They were also asked whether mentors received additional training related to mentoring COIP and what kind of training they received. Interviews were recorded and coded by a trained research assistant. Open-ended responses to the first question regarding addressing problems and challenges were coded based on whether staff members spontaneously mentioned that their mentoring program had specific goals for COIP participating in their program (such as providing more resources to COIP and their families or hiring match support specialists with legal or criminal justice backgrounds; coded as a dichotomous 0/1 response) and received additional funding to serve COIP (coded as a dichotomous 0/1 response). If they reported receiving

additional funding, they were asked how their funding was used. Providing specialized training to mentors in matches with COIP was coded as a dichotomous response, depending upon staff members' responses to the second question. After the research assistant coded all interviews, 20% of the interviews were randomly selected and coded independently by the first author. The Cohen's kappa for the coding was .78, denoting substantial agreement (Viera & Garrett, 2005).

#### *Procedure*

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America transferred their AIM database through a secure file transfer protocol for the purpose of the study. Data about mentors, mentees, and families of mentees were anonymized and the dataset was prepared for analysis by first ensuring that each youth appeared in the dataset only once. When youth appeared in the dataset multiple times (e.g., because they were rematched), match start dates were compared to locate the earliest match and only data from each mentee's first match were retained for the study.

Archival data included a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not youth had an incarcerated parent. All 216 BBBS programs that were represented in the AIM archive to participate in the program enhancements interview and 45 (21%) agreed to participate and consented to the study. Executive directors or other management-level staff members from participating programs were contacted via email to schedule a telephone interview related to enhanced program practices for serving special populations of mentees. All telephone interviews took approximately 60 minutes to conduct. Participating programs were paid a small incentive for their participation.

#### *Analytic Strategy*

To determine whether mentoring differentially affects COIP, we first employed inverse propensity weighting (IPW) to calculate estimators of average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) for use in analyses on the entire BBBSA archival dataset. Employing the propensity score method allowed us to adjust the dataset to correct for the relative rarity of having a parent who had been incarcerated (approximately 19% of the dataset) and to balance the populations (COIP vs. non-COIP) on a set of covariates to increase the likelihood that differences between the populations are due to the COIP status of the child and not due to demographic or other background factors. The procedure for calculating IPW began by identifying background covariates available in the archival dataset that could potentially vary between COIP and non-COIP, and conducting preliminary analyses to test whether differences existed.

Results from preliminary analyses are included in the results section. Once covariates of interest were identified, logistic regressions were estimated that included 20 covariates used to predict the probability of a child having an incarcerated parent. Covariates included youth and volunteer gender, race, ethnicity, and age; youth living situation (e.g., foster care, living with a single mother), family income, and subsidized lunch status; volunteer education, marital status, and profession (helping profession vs. not); and match type (community-based vs. site-based). If the outcome of interest included a baseline measure, the baseline value was included in the logistic regression estimation procedure to further ensure that differences in outcome were due to COIP status and not potential differential baseline values. Probabilities of being a COIP were calculated for all youth with complete data on all covariates. Probabilities were output and the dataset was balanced using ATT equations, resulting in a sample of non-COIP that was similar to the sample of COIP in every available aspect except COIP status. The ATT weights were then included in all regression analyses to determine whether mentoring outcomes differed based upon the COIP status of the youth. Regression analyses were conducted using a multilevel framework to control for the nested nature of the data (i.e., matches are nested within a mentoring program). All covariates that were in the IPW calculation models remained in the regression models to control for effects that may have remained, even after balancing.

To explore whether employing enhanced program practices yields better outcomes for COIP, the balancing and estimation procedures were repeated for a subset of BBBS programs that participated in the program practices telephone interview. An Enhancement\*COIP status interaction was included in multilevel regression models to determine whether COIP specifically benefitted from mentoring program enhancements. When the interaction was significant, follow-up simple slopes analyses were conducted to probe the effects within the COIP and non-COIP populations. Analyses were conducted on matches that had complete data on all covariates, outcomes, and program practices.

## Results

### Analyses of Full Archival Dataset

#### *Preliminary Analyses*

An initial set of chi-square and *t*-test analyses were estimated to determine whether COIP and non-COIP matches from both populations differed on background and demographic variables to determine covariates to include in the IPW estimation models. Results can be seen in Table 1.

COIP were more likely to be male, of a racial minority, receive subsidized lunch, and come from lower income families than non-COIP. COIP were less likely to be Hispanic. COIP did not differ from their non-COIP counterparts in terms of age, but their mentors were slightly older than mentors of non-COIP.

In terms of living situations, COIP were more likely to be living in foster care, with a non-parent relative, in a group or institutional home, and with a single mother than non-COIP. COIP were less likely to live in a two-parent home or live with a single father. Volunteers who are matched with COIP were more likely to be working in a helping profession, slightly more educated, and less likely to be single. Finally, COIP were disproportionately more likely to be part of a community-based match, rather than a school- or site-based match, compared to non-COIP.

All covariates were retained in IPW estimations. Though mentee age did not differ between COIP and non-COIP, it was included in the IPW analyses to maintain consistency between included mentee demographic characteristics and volunteer demographic characteristics.

#### *Match Length Analyses*

When groups were balanced by ATT weights, the mean match length for non-COIP was 12.17 months and the mean match length for COIP was 11.85 months. A regression model was estimated to predict match length based on the dichotomous indicator for COIP status while controlling for all demographic and background covariates. Analyses included 10,579 matches ( $N_{\text{COIP}} = 2207$ ) from 149 mentoring programs. The ATT weights were included in the estimation process and results indicated that COIP youth had matches that were significantly shorter than non-COIP ( $b = -.31, p < .05$ ). However, when the model was adjusted for nesting of matches within a mentoring program, the COIP parameter was no longer significant ( $b = -.24, ns$ ). This suggests that factors at the program level were contributing to the differences in match length between COIP and non-COIP matches that were observed before accounting for the nesting; thus, all further analyses were conducted accounting for nesting of matches within programs.

#### *Strength of Relationship Analyses*

A multilevel regression model was estimated to predict the mentor-reported strength of relationship at 1 year, based on COIP status, while controlling for data nestedness, background and demographic covariates, and the 3-month mentor-reported strength of relationship value. Analyses included 7232 matches ( $N_{\text{COIP}} = 1484$ ) from 125 mentoring programs. The model included ATT weights in the estimation. Results indicated that mentors

**Table 1** Demographic characteristic comparisons between COIP and non-COIP based on the full dataset

Demographic characteristic	COIP youth	Non-COIP youth	Test statistic	<i>p</i> -value
<b>Mentee demographic</b>				
Gender (% male)	48.57%	44.40%	$\chi^2(1) = 67.27$	<.0001
Race (% racial minority)	60.92%	46.73%	$\chi^2(1) = 769.98$	<.0001
Ethnicity (% Hispanic)	19.43%	22.73%	$\chi^2(1) = 60.21$	<.0001
Age	11.59	11.59	$t(18,505) = 0.35$	<i>ns</i>
Receive subsidized lunch	81.93%	68.85%	$\chi^2(1) = 799.59$	<.0001
Family income	3.08	3.96	$t(10,036) = 22.11$	<.0001
<b>Mentee living situation</b>				
Foster care	1.37%	0.63%	$\chi^2(1) = 67.32$	<.0001
Lives with non-parental relative	15.01%	5.48%	$\chi^2(1) = 1,284.17$	<.0001
Group living environment	0.54%	0.26%	$\chi^2(1) = 23.42$	<.0001
Lives with single mother	69.45%	55.40%	$\chi^2(1) = 775.40$	<.0001
Lives with single father	2.26%	4.14%	$\chi^2(1) = 92.52$	<.0001
Lives with two parents	10.15%	32.32%	$\chi^2(1) = 2,327.02$	<.0001
Unknown living situation	1.22%	1.77%	$\chi^2(1) = 17.58$	<.0001
<b>Volunteer demographic</b>				
Gender (% male)	45.21%	39.25%	$\chi^2(1) = 141.26$	<.0001
Race (% racial minority)	28.15%	25.83%	$\chi^2(1) = 26.61$	<.0001
Ethnicity (% Hispanic)	7.92%	9.75%	$\chi^2(1) = 37.36$	<.0001
Age	31.57	30.60	$t(18,678) = 7.51$	<.0001
Marital status (% single)	69.37%	72.06%	$\chi^2(1) = 28.52$	<.0001
Occupation (% helping profession)	17.24%	13.22%	$\chi^2(1) = 120.54$	<.0001
Education level	3.62	3.39	$t(12,842) = 17.23$	<.0001
<b>Match characteristic</b>				
Community-based match	76.22%	53.10%	$\chi^2(1) = 2091.44$	<.0001

COIP, Children of incarcerated parents.

of COIP did not differ in their strength of relationship scores compared to mentors of non-COIP ( $b = .01, ns$ ).

#### Youth Outcome Analyses

Separate multilevel regression models were estimated to predict each youth outcome at 1 year, based on COIP status, while controlling for nestedness, background and demographic covariates, and the baseline value of the youth outcome. Analyses included 5894 matches ( $N_{COIP} = 1347$ ) from 116 mentoring programs. Each model included ATT weights in their estimations. Results indicated that, after 1 year of mentoring, COIP did not differ in their social acceptance ( $b = .02, ns$ ), scholastic competence ( $b = -.01, ns$ ), educational expectations scores ( $b = .00, ns$ ), parental trust ( $b = -.02, ns$ ), or school attendance ( $b = -.04, ns$ ), compared to non-COIP. However, after 1 year of mentoring, COIP had slightly lower grades compared to non-COIP ( $b = -.05, p = .059$ ), though the significance of the parameter estimate was trending.

#### Analyses of Participating Programs Subset

##### Preliminary Analyses

Frequency analyses were completed at the agency level to determine the number of agencies that engaged in each

program enhancement. Very few programs implemented each enhancement; six agencies or 13.3% of the sample reported that they had specific goals related to serving COIP; four agencies or 8.9% of the sample reported providing specialized training for mentors working with COIP (i.e., two programs offered online training and two programs offered additional reading materials to mentors matched with COIP); and eight or 17.8% of the sample reported they had received special funding for serving COIP.

##### Program Practice Analyses

A series of multilevel regression analyses were conducted to determine whether each enhanced program practice benefited COIP in their mentoring and youth outcomes. Each outcome was predicted by COIP status, demographic and background covariates, enhanced program practice, and the interaction between enhanced program practice and COIP status. The group or institutional home living situation covariate was not included in the analyses, as there was not enough variability in responses to analyze it. Enhanced program practices included having specific goals related to serving COIP, having specialized mentor training related to mentoring COIP, and having funding specifically dedicated to providing services to COIP. Each of the three enhanced program practices was tested individually for each outcome. Multilevel analyses were

conducted on matches that had complete data on all covariates, outcomes, and program practices. Sample sizes for analyses varied by outcome. Analyses involving match length were conducted on 5032 matches ( $N_{\text{COIP}} = 1126$ ) from 37 mentoring programs. Analyses involving mentor-reported strength of relationship were conducted on 3427 matches ( $N_{\text{COIP}} = 743$ ) from 30 mentoring programs, and analyses involving youth outcomes were conducted on 2822 matches ( $N_{\text{COIP}} = 669$ ) from 30 mentoring programs. Due to the size of the regression tables (up to 23 independent variables in each analysis), parameter estimates for all analyses are available in supplemental materials.

#### *Having Specific Goals for Serving COIPs*

Results from multilevel analyses related to having specific goals can be seen in Table S1. Having specific goals for COIP matches was unrelated to match length and match strength. However, the relationship between COIP status and educational expectations was moderated by having specific goals for COIP. Follow-up simple slopes analyses revealed that COIP who come from programs that had specific goals for their COIP population had higher educational expectations than COIP whose program did not have specific goals for COIP (simple slope = .29,  $p < .0001$ ). The simple slope for non-COIP was positive and trending toward significance (simple slope = .15,  $p = .0621$ ), suggesting that non-COIP from programs who have specific COIP goals have slightly higher educational expectations than non-COIP from programs that do not have such goals. Having specific goals for COIP matches was unrelated to all other youth outcomes (i.e., youth-reported social acceptance, scholastic competence, grades, parental trust, and school attendance) as both a simple main effect, and as a moderator between outcomes and COIP status.

#### *Providing Specialized Mentor Training for Mentors Serving COIPs*

Results from analyses related to providing specialized mentor training can be seen in Table S2. The relationship between COIP status and match length was moderated by specialized mentor training. Follow-up simple slopes analyses revealed that COIP who come from programs that have specialized training have longer matches than COIP whose programs do not have specialized mentor training (simple slope = 1.24,  $p < .05$ ). The simple slope for non-COIP was non-significant (simple slope = .30, *ns*).

Specialized mentor training also moderated the relationship between child COIP status and mentor-reported strength of relationship. Follow-up simple slopes analyses

revealed that COIP who come from programs that have specialized mentor training have stronger relationships than COIP whose programs do not have specialized mentor training (simple slope = .09,  $p < .05$ ). The effect is opposite for non-COIP. Non-COIP whose programs have specialized training for COIP matches have weaker relationships than non-COIP whose programs do not have specialized training (simple slope =  $-.06$ ,  $p = .0503$ ) and the slope is trending toward statistical significance.

Specialized mentor training was unrelated to all youth outcomes.

#### *Having Supplemental Funding for Serving Matches with COIPs*

Results from analyses related to having additional funding for COIP matches are included in Table S3. The relationship between COIP status and match length was moderated by having additional funding for COIPs. Follow-up simple slopes analyses revealed that COIP from programs that received additional funding for COIP services experienced longer matches than COIP whose programs did not receive such funding (simple slope = 1.57,  $p < .0001$ ). Non-COIP from programs that received additional funding also experienced longer matches than non-COIP whose programs did not receive such funding (simple slope = .74,  $p < .01$ ).

The relationship between COIP status and strength of relationship was also moderated by funding. Simple slopes analyses revealed that COIP from programs that received additional funding had stronger relationships than COIP from programs that did not receive additional funding (simple slope = .10,  $p < .01$ ). The simple slope for non-COIP was non-significant (simple slope =  $-.02$ , *ns*).

Having additional funding for serving COIPs was unrelated to all youth outcomes.

## **Discussion**

Children who have an incarcerated parent are more likely to have been exposed to additional psychosocial risks such as poverty, altered living arrangements including separation from parents, and living in a home without a biological parent. These risks, in turn, may contribute to challenges in establishing and maintaining a long-term, high-quality mentoring relationship among COIP. However, the most important set of findings from this study showed that when mentoring programs enhanced their program practices to address the specific needs of COIP, mentoring can result in more positive match and youth outcomes for youth within this population. Without these enhancements to program operations, the myriad



challenges faced by COIP can minimize the typically positive impacts of mentoring among youth who have an incarcerated parent. Overall, these findings suggest that more targeted and more powerful mentoring interventions are helpful for enhancing the experience of mentoring for COIP.

#### The Impact of Enhanced Program Practices on COIP Matches

Providing specialized training to mentors in a relationship with a COIP resulted in longer and stronger matches. COIP have shorter matches, on average, than non-COIP; however, the difference in match length disappeared after controlling for the nestedness of data, suggesting that differences in match length can be largely attributed to variations between programs. Therefore, focusing on program-level variables such as practice enhancements allowed for the identification of program practices that best fit the needs of COIP and other high-risk youth.

Notably, there was no overall significant difference between COIP and non-COIP in terms of the strength of their mentoring relationships. However, COIP from programs that offered specialized mentor training had stronger relationships than COIP whose programs did not offer specialized training to mentors.

Taken together, the positive effects of mentor training are consistent with findings that trained mentors feel more prepared and ready to be a mentor (Kupersmidt, Stelter et al., 2017), and that mentor self-efficacy is associated with mentor retention, relationship quality, and youth outcomes (DuBois et al., 2002; Herrera et al., 2007; Karcher, Nakkula, & Harris, 2005; Raposa & Rhodes, 2016). In addition to readiness, trained mentors are more knowledgeable about mentoring, in general, as well as about the roles that mentors should and should not play (Kupersmidt, Stelter et al., 2017). Given the complicated family relationship histories of COIP, a deep understanding of mentoring roles and boundaries as well as how to best navigate them, may be particularly helpful to mentors in matches with youth in this high-risk population. Targeted mentor training may be a critical investment for mentoring programs desiring work with special populations of youth such as COIP.

Receiving additional funding for serving COIP was also positively associated with match outcomes. Programs that received additional funding had longer and stronger matches than programs that did not receive additional funding. Mentoring programs primarily reported using additional funding to provide more support to their COIP matches and some programs reported assigning smaller caseloads to their match support staff members who were serving matches including a COIP.

In these ways, match support staff were given more time to provide more frequent and timely support to mentors, mentees, and the parents or guardians of mentees in the form of phone calls, emails, or in-person meetings. The relevance of these findings is consistent with results from qualitative interviews conducted with mentors in matches with COIP in which mentors reported that they wanted more frequent and more substantive contact with match support staff (Merenstein et al., 2011). If pre-match mentor training sets mentors up for success in initiating a mentoring relationship with a COIP, then ongoing match support can help to sustain and grow these relationships. Meta-analytic findings have supported the concept that ongoing post-match mentor training and support are associated with positive mentee outcomes (DuBois et al., 2002).

The third program enhancement of having specific goals for serving COIP was not associated with any differences in match outcomes overall or with COIP youth; however, having specific goals for the population was associated with higher educational expectations in COIP. COIP who come from programs that have specific goals for them had higher educational expectations than COIP who come from programs without such goals. Programs may be generating specific educational goals for their COIP, goals that may trickle down to the mentees' own educational expectations of themselves, a first step to longer term educational success. The results did not reveal that the differential effect of having specific goals for COIP carried over into more objective indices of educational success such as grades and school attendance; however, additional enhancements or longer term follow-up may be needed to observe these types of effects.

Although we hypothesized that having specific goals for the population would suggest an intentional approach to the mentoring relationship, it may not be enough to result in detectable effects, particularly in terms of match outcomes, without the concomitant influx of resources for the program to address the needs of matches including this population adequately. In addition, programs may need to not only have goals for their programs but also incorporate their goals into actionable practices. Programs that integrate best practices into their program models demonstrate stronger effect sizes than programs that employ fewer best practices (DuBois et al., 2002).

The disproportionate prevalence of COIP in community-based programs (vs. school-based programs) highlights the interest and initiative that mentoring programs have taken in targeting COIP for more intensive services (Herrera et al., 2013; Tolan et al., 2014). Having disproportionately more COIP and their mentors in a community-based context, which typically involves less structure than school- or site-based contexts, highlights the

importance of offering high quality mentor training to bolster mentor preparedness and efficacy.

### The Impact of Enhanced Program Practices on Non-COIP Matches

The effect of enhanced program practices also appeared to have an impact on mentored children who did not have an incarcerated parent (non-COIP). First, the effect for mentor training was reversed for non-COIP for match strength. Non-COIP whose programs offered specialized mentor training had relationships that were not as strong as non-COIP whose programs offered no specialized mentor training. One possible explanation for this seemingly counterintuitive finding is that the specialized training for mentors matched with COIP may have included resources that would be beneficial generally for all mentors. For example, content about when to seek match support, how to maintain patience with youth, or how to maintain a strong and healthy relationship with a youth who has issues with trust and separation may be useful for all mentors. If specialized training contained this type of content, then mentors who are not matched with COIP would not have access to this type of training and may be less prepared for their matches. Programs that implement specialized training for mentors of COIP must ensure that their standard mentor training is of equally high quality for all mentors.

Second, results indicated that both COIP and non-COIP from programs that had additional COIP funding had longer matches than their counterparts from programs that did not receive additional funding. This pattern of findings suggests that programs that receive additional COIP funding may have more resources overall to support their matches. Future research might explore how supplemental funding impacts the overall resources, functioning, employee morale, and operations of mentoring programs to better understand this “trickle-down” effect.

Third, results indicated that both COIP and non-COIP from programs with specific goals for COIP had higher educational expectations than their counterparts did at programs without such goals (though the simple slope was trending for non-COIP). This finding could reflect a spillover effect of the practice of developing specific goals to affect all matches served by the agency including non-COIP mentees more broadly. Mentoring program staff members who work with COIP to set specific goals may also work with non-COIP mentees and may incorporate this enhanced practice into their support with these matches as well.

### Stress Exposure Among COIP Compared to Non-COIP

The preliminary analyses from the current project revealed some of the stressors that COIP experience as compared

to their non-COIP counterparts. Children of incarcerated parents were more likely to come from lower income families and receive subsidized lunch. Likewise, COIP were more likely to live in single parent homes or in a home without a biological parent, such as foster care, group or institutional living, or with a non-parental relative. These results are consistent with previous explorations of the COIP populations that outline not only the resultant economic tolls that parental incarceration can take but also the possible upheavals in children’s living situations that can occur with the incarceration of a parent. Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that these stressors mediate the impact of parental incarceration on adolescent’s adjustment (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a, 2011b).

### Strengths of the Study

This study has several strengths. The mentors and mentees in this sample lived across the United States and were heterogeneous with respect to their sex, race, ethnicity, education, urbanity, and exposure to incarceration. Given the great diversity of this sample, these findings are highly relevant to mentoring programs providing one-to-one, community-based mentoring.

Second, the IPW procedure involved the inclusion of 20 covariates, requiring complete data on all covariates to be included in the calculations. Though all records with any missing data were excluded from analyses, the sheer size of the archival BBBS database allowed for analyses that still included thousands of participants and hundreds of COIP after case-wise deletion reduced the sample size.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Results from the current project highlight the importance of studying enhanced program practices for mentoring programs serving at-risk youth. However, there were some methodological limitations that should be noted. The current analyses included only mentoring programs affiliated with BBBSA and only a subset of those programs were engaging in enhanced practices for their COIP matches. Thus, generalizability of the findings is limited to one-to-one mentoring programs that utilize a program model and guidelines that are similar to the BBBS model. Future studies of the impact of implementing enhanced program practices in the context of other mentoring program models will provide insight into the generalizability of these specific enhancements for improving match and youth outcomes.

Future studies of the impact of program practices on mentored COIP should include examinations of a wider array of enhanced practices, such as increased efforts to recruit children of incarcerated parents, staff training, and specialized efforts to provide match support. More

detailed information about the content and modality of trainings, how funding was used to serve COIP matches, and what specific goals were and how they were implemented should be collected to gain a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics involved in implementing enhanced practices in mentoring program models.

Finally, the youth outcome variables that were examined in the present study came from the BBBSA archive consisting of a core set of youth outcomes that are commonly examined in evaluations of mentoring. Therefore, the archive did not include outcomes that were specific to the needs or issues faced by COIP. Future studies could include assessments of a broad range of variables, including those that may be more directly affected by parental incarceration, such as feelings of stigma and antisocial behavior.

## Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable information about the importance of implementing enhancements to mentoring programs serving children with an incarcerated parent. Carefully designing variations in program models and goals as well as in the implementation of enhanced research-informed and theoretically grounded program practices may prove to be the best avenues for formal mentoring programs to have the broadest reach and strongest impact on subpopulations of our nation's most vulnerable youth.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site.