

Analyzing the Social Return on Investment in Youth Mentoring Programs

A framework for Minnesota

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This study was done at the same time as a companion study of youth intervention programs. The studies share a common methodological framework.

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Executive summary

Youth mentoring programs perform an increasingly vital function by bringing children and youth into contact with committed, caring adults in order to build attitudes and skills which will help them be productive and fulfilled citizens. This study puts forward a framework for quantifying the value of the benefits of youth mentoring programs and comparing them to program costs in order to calculate the social return-on-investment (SROI) of such programs.

Major findings

- Many organizations in Minnesota offer a spectrum of youth mentoring services, both in the Twin Cities Metropolitan area and in Greater Minnesota.
- While there may be broad, and perhaps increasing, recognition of the value of youth mentoring programs, there have been only limited attempts to analyze that value in economic terms.
- Based on our study of mentoring programs in Minnesota, it is clear that such programs can produce some or all of the following direct benefits whose values can (in principle) be quantified:
 - Improved school attendance and performance – leading to increased graduation rates, increased post-secondary education, and higher lifetime earnings;
 - Reduced truancy – resulting in reduced school costs and, ultimately, reduced high school dropouts and increased lifetime earnings;
 - Improved health outcomes – including reductions in teen pregnancy, reduced or delayed use of tobacco, alcohol, or illicit drugs;
 - Reduced juvenile crime (both violence and property crimes) – saving victim costs, court costs, and costly treatment of juvenile offenders;
 - Reduced costs of adult crime – both the crime losses of victims and the societal costs of prosecuting and incarcerating adult offenders;
 - Reduced needs for social services – both near-term costs of counseling and long-term costs of public assistance;

- This paper explains a framework for comparing the dollar value of costs and benefits of youth mentoring programs in Minnesota. This framework can be used to calculate the social return-on-investment (SROI) of such programs.
- The formal application of this framework to estimate the SROI of a particular program would require either data from a complete, scientific program evaluation that included an unmentored control group or, at a minimum, detailed contemporaneous and follow-up data on program participants that could be compared to norms for youth of similar age and background.
- The applied practice of valuing the benefits of youth programs (when sufficient outcomes data is available) is a rapidly evolving field of inquiry. More and more of these potential benefits can be included in analyses as SROI analysis becomes more widespread and as necessary data becomes available.
- Based on very limited outcomes data available for Minnesota youth programs, the results of a few national program evaluations, and conservative assumptions in line with the experience of Minnesota youth programs, we provide an SROI analysis of a fictional composite representative mentoring program. We estimate that:
 - **Based on conservative assumptions about outcomes and valuations, our representative program returns benefits of \$2.72 for every dollar of resources used.**
 - **The program returns \$2.08 for every dollar of cost if the value of mentors' time is excluded from the estimated benefits.**
 - **The program returns \$1.87 of public benefits (public cost savings and increased tax revenues) for every dollar actually spent on the program.**
- The actual returns for a particular program would depend on the outcomes and expenses of that particular program. We believe that returns in the example presented here fairly represent the returns that are achievable for well-run, effective mentoring programs. In some cases, it is certainly possible that returns could be higher than these examples, especially when a program deals with very high-risk populations.
- To produce more accurate and detailed analyses of individual programs, more detailed data on program participants will need to be kept in order to measure and document juvenile and adult outcomes more precisely. This data collection could include an intermediate-term (5- to 10-year) longitudinal study of participants and similar youth who do not participate in mentoring programs.