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FOOTSTEPS: RISK REDUCTION ANTIDOTES FOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS; FINDINGS FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on five mentoring pairs (adult/child) who participated in a mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents. Children ranged in age from eight to 15 years. Data were collected through bi-weekly journal interviews conducted with children, caregivers, and mentors over a five-week period to assess caregiver-child and incarcerated-parent relationships, contact with incarcerated parents, and children's behavior problems. Qualitative evaluation questioning involved effectiveness of intervention on cognition, self-worth, and esteeming issues. Participants reported that most of their time were spent discussing the effect of parental incarceration on family systems, interpersonal relationships, and academic performance. Although some children viewed their incarcerated parents as positive attachment figures, other children reported negative feelings toward or no relationship with incarcerated parents. In addition, assessments of children ten years old and older revealed that having no contact with the incarcerated parent was associated with children revealing more feelings of alienation toward that parent than with children who had contact. Children's behavior problems were a prime concern, often occurring within a relational context or in reaction to social stigma associated with parental imprisonment. Additionally, a need assessment survey was also conducted utilizing a random sample of 75 parents of middle and high school students residing within Harlem, New York who attend its municipal public school system for the purpose of identifying significant community issues.

Keywords: behavior problems, mentoring relationships, parental incarceration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Murray & Farrington (2008), as supported by Shalafer & Poehlmann (2010) stated that children of incarcerated parents experience increased risk for antisocial outcomes, internalizing symptoms, and academic difficulties. Furthermore, it is stated that over 2.5 million children have a parent in state or federal prison; children of incarcerated parents often experience significant disruptions in their family relationships because of changes in caregivers and separation from imprisoned parents. The majority of these children are very young; over half are less than ten years old; more than 20 percent are younger than age five (Jucovy, 2006).

Some have even experienced the unique trauma of seeing their parent arrested and taken away; with a parent's incarceration, their connection to a central adult in their lives has been severed. While their parents are incarcerated, the children might reside with their other parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or in a foster home. Some are shifted from one caregiving arrangement to another. These caregivers are likely to be living in poverty and lack the personal resources necessary to meet the children's needs; these needs can be complex (Jucovy, 2006).

Increasing research on the specific challenges faced by children of incarcerated parents is becoming evident; these studies suggest that they suffer from a particular form of grief and loss that comes from having a complex mix of anger, sadness, shame, guilt, and depression. As a result, they often act out inappropriately with classroom behavior difficulties and low academic performance. Unsurprisingly, a high percentage ends up in serious trouble as well. According to a U.S. Senate report, children of prisoners are six times more likely than other children to be incarcerated at some point in their lives (Jucovy, 2006; Barron-McKeagney & Woody, 2007, D'Souza, 2007). Without effective intervention strategies, these children will become involved with the criminal justice system.

The number of children at risk is certain to grow; the nation's prison population is increasing by approximately six percent each year. Significantly, the number of incarcerated females is increasing at an even faster pace, more than doubling since 1990. Women, far often than men, are a child's custodial parent before entering prison. As a result, increasing numbers of children are losing the central adult in their lives to crime and the prison system (Jucovy, 2006). It is now estimated that over 100,000 children residing in New York City have at least one parent incarcerated (New York City Mission Society, 2009). Currently, among two-thirds of youth within the New York State juvenile justice system has one or both parents incarcerated (NYS Department of Corrections, 2010).

Although children of incarcerated parents experience these significant disruptions, a review of the literature noted a limited number of empirical studies focused on the quality of attachment or caregiving relationships. In this study, emphasis was placed on children's feelings about their relationships with caregivers and incarcerated parents, assessed caregivers' perceptions and feelings about children, and examined associations among relationship perceptions, contact with incarcerated parents, and behavior problems in children of incarcerated parents within the context of a youth mentoring program.

2. REDUCTION OF RISK AND ENHANCED WELL-BEING

Bowlby (1982) drew on ethological research and theory that pointed to a number of instinctive behavioral systems that facilitate survival, including attachment and caregiving. A key function of the child's attachment system is to maintain proximity to an attachment figure in order to ensure the child's protection. The caregiving system in the parenting figure is concerned with protecting and supporting the child while striking a balance with other personal goals (George & Solomon, 2008). Since its inception, attachment theory has emphasized the negative effects of separation from parents on children's attachments and subsequent developmental outcomes (Bowlby, 1982). Because most children of incarcerated parents experience disruptions in family relationships that occur as a result of separation and changing living arrangements, an attachment perspective is well-suited to examine these processes.

3. THE RATIONALE FOR MENTORING

Within the last ten years, children of incarcerated parents have been recognized as a specific group with special needs. By all accounts, in many cases, they are attempting to develop without a steady, reliable adult in their lives. A constant, nurturing relationship with a dependable adult is an essential developmental support for children. Given this reality, mentoring would seem to be a promising approach for responding to the challenges these children are facing. Evaluation results provide clear evidence that mentors can make a tangible difference in young people's lives (Jucovy, 2006). In the mid 1990's, a random assignment study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), the nationally known mentoring organization showed that having a mentor – a consistently caring and supportive adult – significantly reduced a young person's initiation of drug and alcohol use, improved their school performance, and reduced incidences of violence (Jucovy, 2006,).

Rhodes (2006) has proposed that mentoring affects youth through three interrelated processes: (1) by enhancing youth's social relationships and emotional well-being, (2) by improving their cognitive skills through instruction and conversation, and (3) by promoting positive identity development through serving as role models and advocates. These

processes are likely to act in concert with one another over time. Furthermore, the effectiveness of each of these three processes is likely to be governed, at least in part, by the quality and longevity of the relationships established between young people and their mentors. The mentoring relationship can thus become a corrective experience for those youth who may have experienced unsatisfactory relationships with their parents.

Some critics, such as Larose, Tarabulsy, and Cyrenne (2010) argued that in spite of the increase in research on factors that may moderate the effects of mentoring on youth, relatively little work has focused on the potential impact of the mentor-protégé relationship throughout the mentoring process. These critics maintain that this lack of research may be attributable, in part, to the perhaps generalized assumption that mentoring is in and of itself a positive process. It has been said that the success of mentoring relationships depend on the quality of bonding between mentor and mentee. Monaghan (2010) refers to the mentoring process as a working alliance.

Such an alliance is considered as a clinical construct applicable to all support relationships. It focuses on the process of change and is defined as a function of three basic parameters likely to facilitate interpersonal engagement and collaboration: (1) a respectful and friendly bond between helpers and helpees; (2) an agreement on the goals or outcomes of the support relationship; and (3) an agreement on the task activities designed to achieve these goals. A working alliance is not a static construct, and its nature and intensity may vary over the course of the relationship (Furcron-Turnage, 2005). The common thread running throughout the reviewed literature has showed that mentors who are able to establish strong working relationships with their mentees will experience greater commitment to the support relationship and will improve the likelihood that mentees will benefit from their presence and experience.

Accordingly, youth engaged in mentoring relationships characterized by positive bonds, high levels of agreement on goals, and high levels of agreement on tasks will show better academic adjustment and achievement than will youth who are involved in low alliance mentoring relationships or than non-mentored students. Furthermore, mentoring fits in with dominant cultural values because it represents the need for adult support and guidance. Most Americans are not for “big government”; they are for volunteerism and the “personal touch” versus the paid professional as a means to help people. They prefer to think most individual issues can be resolved by willpower and determination, with a minimum of outside help (DuBois & Karcher, 2005).

In addition, American politics is overwhelmingly conservative about social policy except for brief periods in the 1930's (i.e. the signing of the Social Security Act) and 1960's to 1970's (i.e. the signing of civil rights and anti-poverty legislation). Although the 1990's were dominated by a Democratic president, a strong economy and a healthy federal budget, there were few new social policy initiatives of any size or significance. An intervention based on volunteerism (i.e. mentoring) was appealing simply because it was politically feasible. Mentoring has also benefitted from congressional support; federal grant funding was enacted in 2002, with increases in 2004. This increase was expanded to include a mentoring program for children of prisoners, spearheaded by the Bush administration along with Representative Chaka Fattah, and Senators Landrieu, Clinton, Specter et al (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2007).

4. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The statement of the purpose of the research being presented in this article concerns whether mentoring is a viable therapeutic solution when dealing with children of incarcerated parents.

5. EVALUATION QUESTIONS

- How well did the intervention work?
- How does the intervention fit with other programs already being offered?
- If the intervention is successful, how will it be sustained?

6. METHOD

This study was part of a previous project conducted by the researcher. The purpose of the previous study addressed whether mentoring was an appropriate intervention to improve academic participation and performance among African-American and Latino youth residing within the Central Harlem community. The purpose of the study was to serve as a contribution to the literature on mentoring at-risk youth with family and academic issues. The previous survey was a random sampling of 75 parents of middle and high school students attending NYC Department of Education (NYCDOE) institutions, and 50 educators working within these institutions. Of that sampling, 45 of the parents (target population) returned their mailings; 25 were selected for classification and coding. Among the educators (key informants), a random sampling of NYCDOE mailing lists was used to select 50 potential respondents; 30 returned their mailings; 15 were selected. All participants were affiliated with Central Harlem, whether as residents or faculty. All responses were categorized and coded through the use of Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) software to generate quantitative (numerical) data.

7. PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEEDURES

The intervention took place at the New York City Mission Society's Minisink Town House. The organizational meeting occurred on November 9, 2011. Present at this meeting were the researcher/facilitator, program coordinator, and case manager for the Amachi Mentoring Program. During this meeting, planning, implementation, evaluation methodology, and scheduling of intervention's sessions were discussed. In addition, short-term (6-18 months) and long-term (18-36 months) goals and objectives were outlined. According to the literature, a bonding period of six to twelve months is necessary to facilitate quality mentoring relationships (Jucovy, 2006; Rogers, 2006; Shalafer & Pohlmann, 2009; Cavell et al, 2009).

Given these constraints, the planning committee agreed upon a convenience sample of five mentor/mentee pairs (with each child accompanied by a guardian) for interviewing and questionnaire participation. The children ranged in age from eight to fifteen years. Selection criteria were based on (1) length of mentoring relationship and (2) accessibility for interviewing. A review board comprised of the agency director, program director, and case manager provided consent for the researcher/facilitator to proceed with the intervention after considering the ages of the children involved in the research (all are under age 18). Furthermore, two additional means of consent were incorporated into the intervention: (1) each child will be accompanied by a parent or guardian, and (2) written and verbal informed consent proceeds each session.

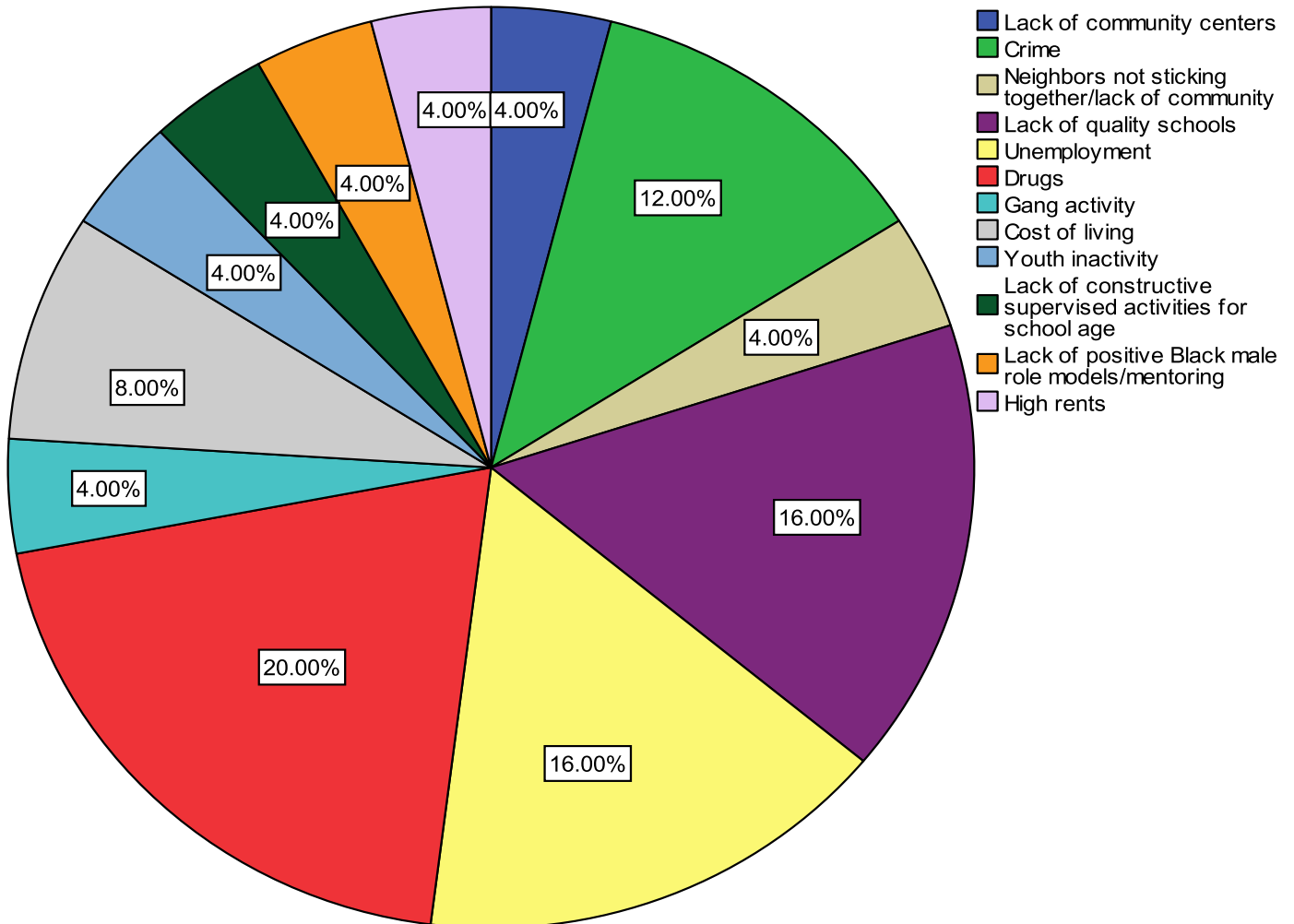
Ethical guidelines were delineated from the five guiding principles for youth mentoring behavior derived from the American Psychological Association (APA): (1) promote the safety and well-being of the young person [beneficence and malfeasance]; (2) be trustful and responsible [fidelity and responsibility]; (3) act with integrity; (4) promote justice for young people; and (5) respect the young person's rights of freedom and dignity (Rhodes, Liang, & Spencer, 2009).

Data were collected through bi-weekly journal interviews whereas the mentor/mentee pairs agreed to meet at Minisink Town House for a one-hour session over a five-week period. Gantt chart and project logic modeling were utilized for project design, planning and implementation. Journaling allowed the interviewer to record verbal and non-verbal cues regarding feelings and opinions about the efficiency of the mentoring process. Additionally, relationship quality (between child and incarcerated parent) was drawn out through the interview process. Interviewing is considered the most basic process used for information gathering, problem solving, and psychosocial information giving (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). Limitations to the method selected involved the honesty of client stories; the researcher relied on the verbal/nonverbal cues within the interview process for accurate collection of data.

8. RESULTS OF THE INTERVENTION: RELEVANT FINDINGS FROM THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

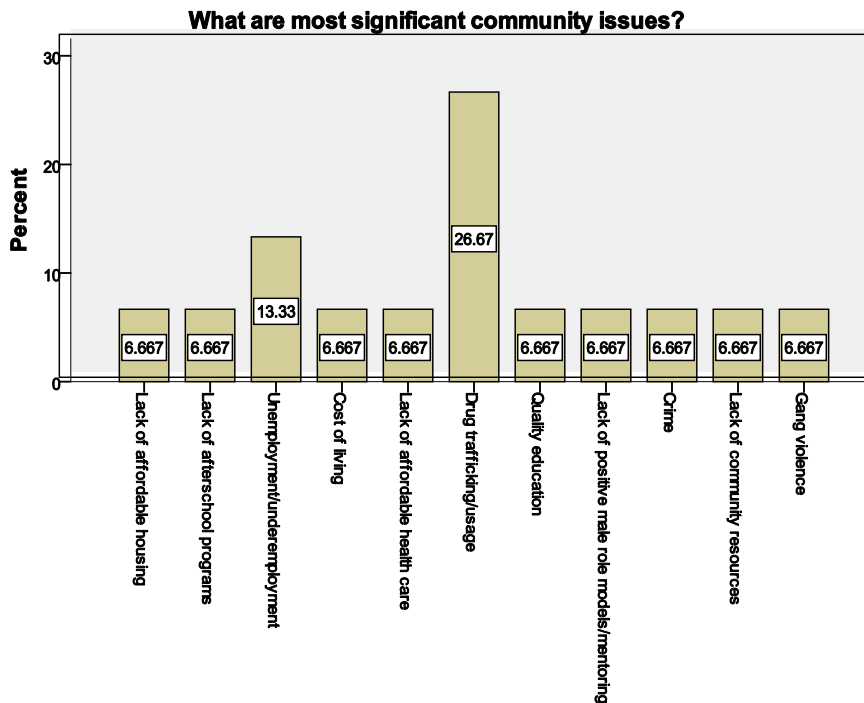
Table 1. Most Significant Issues in Community, Target Population

Most significant issues in community?

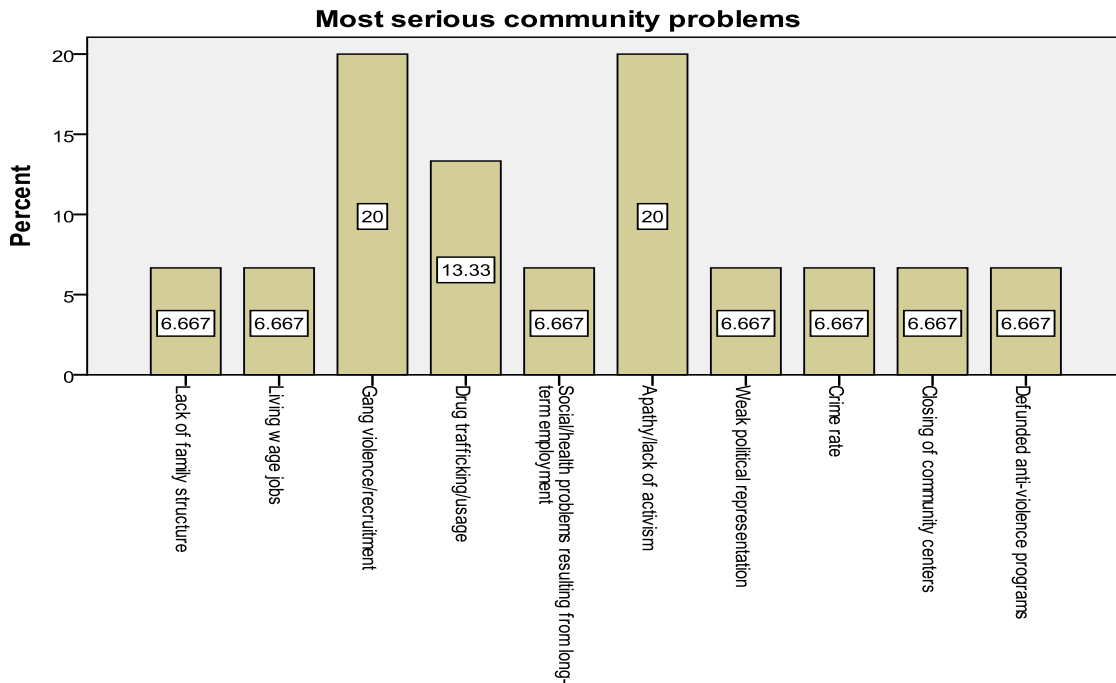


The most significant community issues expressed by a random sampling of Central Harlem parents indicated several areas of concern. Twenty percent of the respondents described drug trafficking and usage as most significant; 16% of respondents believed unemployment and a lack of quality schools were of most concern; 12% indicated that crime was the prevailing community issue. The responses portray a diversity of opinions concerning major community issues. A small segment of respondents described youth inactivity and the lack of positive male role models (4%) as a significant issue. The survey was an indication of significant gaps of community awareness regarding the impact of disaffected youth influencing these issues; however, the review of the literature revealed social indicator data undergirding the importance of mentoring relationships as an appropriate means of risk reduction.

Table 2. Most Significant Issues in Community, Key Informants

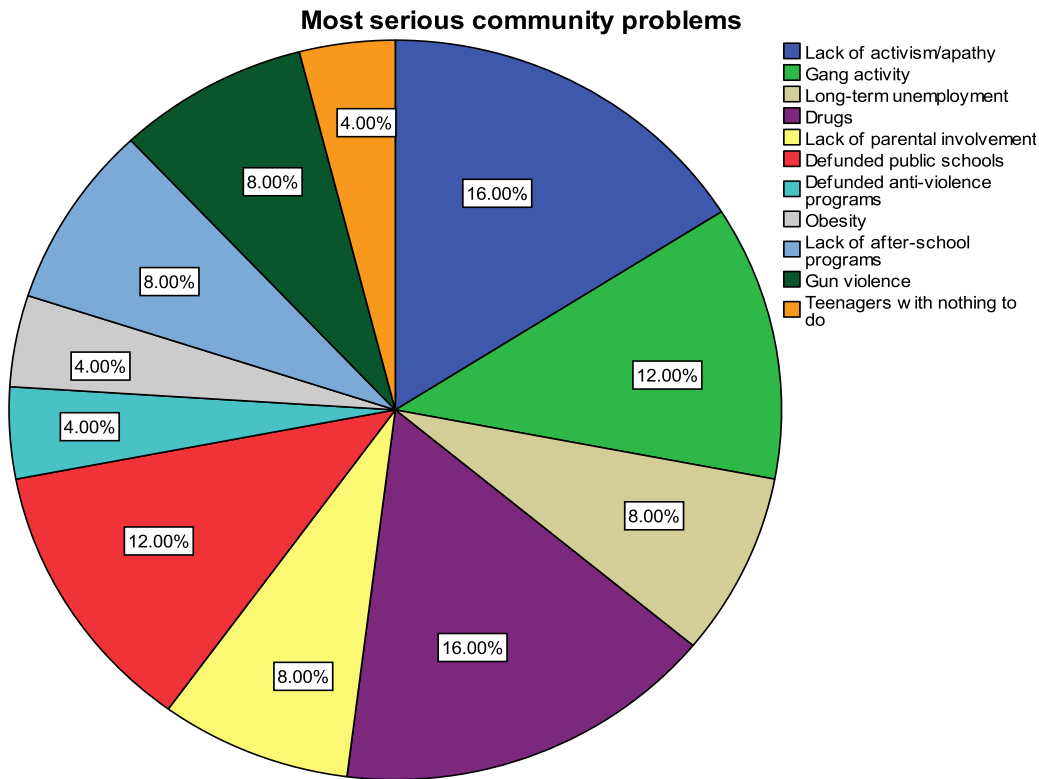


Similar diverse responses regarding community issues were expressed by a random sampling representation of New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) educators, administrators, and support staff assigned to Central Harlem's District Five. Twenty-seven percent of the sample described drug trafficking and usage as most significant, compared to 20% expressed by the Central Harlem parents. Thirteen percent rated unemployment and underemployment as significant issues, compared to 16% of the parental sample. Seven percent of these respondents ranked various issues of importance, including the issues of positive role models and mentoring, gang violence, and the lack of afterschool programs. Although minimally regarded, one must realize the relevance of these issues validated through several types of social indicators and the review of the literature. Furthermore, most of these issues are interrelated (i.e. after school programs and community centers shuttered as a result of city-wide budget reductions). It is more than likely that mentoring programs were located in most or all of these discontinued venues.

Table 3. Most Serious Community Problems, Target Population

Concerning the most serious community problems, three variables are outstanding; 20% of the parents' sample revealed a significant level of apathy or a lack of community activism among Central Harlem residents, which can be extended to include ineffective political representation within the district. Pockets of anti-violence activism exist; however, the response often follows a major act of violence involving disaffected youth. City and statewide budget reductions have also resulted in defunded anti-violence initiatives. In May of 2011, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo announced budget reductions to various anti-violence initiatives for austerity purposes.

Twenty percent of the respondents described gang activity as a major concern; 13% cited drug activity and usage as a serious issue. When correlating these variables, a portrait is depicted of an emotionally drained neighborhood beset by issues of gang and drug activity within an environment of reduction of community support services and ineffective political representation. As stated in the review of the literature, mentoring relationships have been cited as cost-effective initiatives drawing upon traditional values of positive role modeling and community leadership.

Table 4. Most Serious Community Problems, Key Informants

Responses from the key informants are more diverse than those of the target population. The most prominent concerns were focused on drug-related activity and community apathy (16%); defunded public schools and gang activity were also of genuine concern (12%). Other significant concerns expressed by this sample included gun violence, lack of afterschool programs, lack of parental involvement, and long-term employment (8%). Each of these variables are interrelated as to cause and effect regarding behavior of at-risk youth; for example, those who lack parental involvement are highly likely to fulfill their needs by joining gangs. Those who join youth gangs are more likely to engage in forms of violence; many of these disaffected youth are underperforming in defunded public schools, or suffer from a lack of available community support systems (available from afterschool programs). This is the population segment best served through participation in agency-based mentoring programs.

9. FINDINGS OF THE CHANGE PROJECT

Participants reported that most of their time were spent discussing the effect of parental incarceration on family systems, interpersonal relationships, and academic performance. Although some children viewed their incarcerated parents as positive attachment figures, other children reported negative feelings toward or no relationship with incarcerated parents. In addition, assessments of children ten years old or older revealed that having no contact with the incarcerated parent was associated with children revealing more feelings of alienation toward that parent than children who had contact. Children's behavior problems were a prime concern, often occurring within a relational context or in reaction to social stigma associated with parental imprisonment.

In relation to the evaluation questions, client responses were congruent with the objectives discussed at the organizational meeting. Quality of data collection was sufficient for long-term planning and implementation objectives. The data collected from the journal interviews provided the need for further examination into the effects of Bowlby's studies of separation anxiety on cognition and academic performance. In addition, the evaluation results coincided with two key points noted within the review of the literature: (1) the three interrelated mentoring processes of emotional well being, improvability of cognitive skills through instruction and conversation, and positive role modeling, and (2) the description of the mentoring process as a working alliance between helper and helpee.

Family systems are tremendously impacted as a result of parental incarceration. Anderson, Carter, and Lowe (1999) propounds that systems are "an organized whole made up of components that interact in a way distinct from their interaction with other entities over time. To wit, relatively open systems carry out exchanges of information, energy, and material across its boundaries with its external environment while maintaining exchanges with its own internal subsystems" (p. 30). Positive or negative, any impact on one or more subsystems has an impact on the entire system. The incarceration of a head of household (or, for that matter, the primary role model for the child) results in significant disruption of the family unit – with economic and socioemotional ramifications.

Furthermore, children's behavioral problems unfold with increased risk for internalized symptoms (i.e. self-image and esteeming issues), academic difficulties (including possible placement in special education programs), resulting in negative impacts on external systems interacting with dysfunctional families. Some of these systems include educational, extended family, foster care, and law enforcement). In many instances, losses of income from parental incarceration result in families applying for public assistance, according to the United States Census Bureau (www.census.gov).

Common negative assumptions regarding imprisoned individuals (mental models) result in labeling and demonization of children and families. Mental models are defined as "deeply ingrained assumptions, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action (Senge, 1990, p. 8-10). To a child, the resulting peer pressure frequently manifests in internalized negative feelings and/or overt violent behavior. Families are often scorned or shunned by neighbors once information concerning incarceration becomes public.

Appropriate intervention theories for children of incarcerated parents must address symptoms associated with separation anxiety and self-esteem. Developing children are not capable of mature thought and are prone to impulse responses to negative events (i.e. "fight or flight"). Attachment theory stipulates that at nine months, infants give indication of their intensity of their attachment to their parents by expressing rage and despair when their parents leave; this reaction is called separation anxiety. This is a key behavioral indicator of attachment quality. Over time, the formation of a secure attachment relationship can influence the child's ability to explore and engage the environment with confidence, knowing the protective "other" is nearby. In contrast, children with disorganized attachments are very withdrawn or hostile and aggressive (Newman & Newman, 2009, p. 151).

The review of the literature also revealed that Carl Rogers' person-centered theory is capable of addressing separated children's self-worth and esteem issues. Person-centered theory recognizes the client as a worthy individual, and that the best vantage point for understanding behavior is from the client's own frame of reference. The therapist expresses empathic understanding while establishing a therapeutic climate of congruence and unconditional positive regard (Corey, 2009, p. 164). As applied to a child of an incarcerated parent, this intervention theory can remove the stigma from the individual while reinforcing the premise that the child is a worthy person, and that he/she cannot be defined by life events they cannot control.

Limitations of the findings were related to honesty of the respondents. Using microskills of attentive listening (including emphasis on verbal and nonverbal cues) and expressing positive regard for clients, the researcher drew out reliable client stories for use in the evaluation process.

10. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Reviewing the pros and cons of the issues of effectiveness as a therapeutic intervention, mentoring has been found to inject the importance of adult-youth relationships, particularly nonfamily relationships, into a significant segment of public policy that deals with youth. It is a welcome contrast to the highly partisan political approaches dominating so many policy initiatives and that miss the simple human factor at the core of most individual improvement. Mentoring is also about something that works with broad agreement; one of the few social policy initiatives with bipartisan support among legislators. With the pervasive leanings toward cost-cutting and smaller government, this attitude has played the role in getting social policy to the low point in which it is held today.

Mentoring is about positive outcomes. It is better for the long-term that mentoring and the broader idea of the critical importance of nonfamily relationships are (1) appropriately inserted into the various existing legislation and policy domains relating to youth and (2) highlighted or tested as special initiatives to demonstrate new uses or emphasis for mentoring, whether it targets children of incarcerated parents or homeless families, assisting the transition from foster care, reducing the extreme isolation of juvenile facilities which drain budgets, or working with very young children who are exhibiting poor behaviors in the classroom. It is among these high-risk youth that the human factor exemplified by mentoring is most missing and needed; it is with these youth and the institutions with which they interact that its lessons must be aligned and integrated.

On the other hand, creation of an exclusive, all-powerful piece of legislation would corrupt the true meaning and purpose of mentoring (i.e. "Race to the Top"), and would undermine mentoring strengths:

- It would make quality control more difficult in the rush for numbers and funding, as is with the current situation in New York State, where public schools are being closed in favor of charter schools.
- It would remove incentives to target underserved, high-risk youth, again, to acquire numbers and money; another form of corruption.
- Politicians would claim, once more, to have "found the answer", which is far too simplistic in a complex world – and, of course, claim credit for their discovery in a 24/7 news cycle with sound bites and media strategy
- It would marginalize mentoring's importance to a narrowly structured program, when its ultimate importance lies in the imaginative and versatile use of all its lessons in institutions that deal with youth
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11. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Creating a viable program means selecting solid research questions. Each bullet represents a potential area of riches. Some of the obvious questions that arise are the following:

- How do funders interact with program developers?
- What is the process of an organization as it develops a mentoring program?
- How are programs defined and developed, including recruiting and utilizing volunteers?
- How do outcomes relate to the quality and quantity of mentoring programs?

Example 1: investigate the role of volunteerism factors in effective practice. Some of the depth of some of these potential research areas can be seen with the simple role of volunteers in mentoring. To begin, a program must first recruit volunteer mentors. In addition to the plethora of concerns about appropriateness of volunteers (i.e. use of background checks), an organization must first consider the best ways to conduct recruitment, and once these volunteers are recruited, strategies should be implemented to sustain their activity. In recent years, research literature on recruiting and retaining volunteers generally has emerged (Clary et al, 2007). This literature begins by identifying the motivations underlying involvement in volunteer work. Out of this conceptual framework of volunteers' motivations, an instrument for assessing each of the six motivations was constructed: the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI). Research has found that each of the six measures is reliable, and several additional studies point to the VFI's validity (Clary et al, 2007; Okun, Barr, & Herzog, 2007).

Example 2: Cavell, Elledge, Malcolm, & Faith (2009) recommend conducting meta-analytic studies to enhance understanding of the relationship between capacity and outcomes. This also suggests areas of future research. The overall capacity of the mentoring organization or program is a critical component. A reasonable first step in a program of research might focus on correlational methods and building of a national database from existing mentoring programs and organizations. Specifically, review of the literature has identified three constructs involving organizational capacity involving skills/abilities and motivations of the individuals and program.

First, with respect to measures at the individual level (mentors and staff), assessments would include the individuals' motivation for mentoring, their understanding of "best practices" with respect to mentoring, their abilities to establish and maintain relationships with youth, and the feedback on skills and motivation from mentoring recipients. Second, at the organizational level, support for mentoring measures might include funding support from city and state; the size of the organization (support staff and clientele), the sophistication of the initial and organizational training programs for mentoring, the degree to which members are engaged in tasks directly related to the mentoring mission, and the density of organizational partnerships and coalitions.

Finally, utilization of this database would include key measures of outcomes for mentoring recipients; both outcomes related to risk behaviors (i.e. drug and alcohol use, violent behavior, truancy, etc.) and positive behaviors (i.e.) academic performance, community activism, and productive usage of free time). The aforementioned research can be used to create interventions that can be evaluated with experimental and quasi-experimental designs. Based on analysis of the variables discussed (with single variables and combinations of variables), an empirical definition of high and low-capacity organizations can include at least three groups: (1) a treatment designed to establish a high-capacity mentoring program; (2) a treatment designed to establish programs with a moderate level of capacity; (3) an untreated control program – and collection of pre and post-test measures. Furthermore, versatility is suggested with the choice of an experimental versus quasi-experimental design, depending whether or not random assignment is feasible.

The findings from the research should point to areas of future research. The research on volunteer motivations can be carried specifically to the mentoring field. For example, understanding which variables under community organizational control can be manipulated in order to build the best corps of volunteers and the best mentoring relationships is a building block in the mentoring field. Community-based agencies that develop mentoring programs can tailor recruitment and quality control to recognize motivational factors and develop specific program strategies to fulfill mentor needs and enhance risk reduction among at-risk youth while promoting volunteer sustainability.

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