SURVIVING THE DARK TIMES: THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS

OF MENTORS ON COLLEGE ATTENDANCE

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Surviving the Dark Times: The Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mentors on College Attendance

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Growing up in dangerous communities present youth with many obstacles such as failing schools, poverty, and crime. However, what do we know about the youth who "beat the odds" and managed to successfully adapt to these challenges? This question is important to answer because understanding the factors that have aided in the college attendance of residents from especially challenged neighborhoods could be key to breaking the cycle of poverty, violence and academic failure in high crime areas. Using interviews of college respondents (n=20 male; n=20 female) who grew up in one of "America's Most Dangerous Cities" this research focused on the effects of informal and formal mentors in encouraging educational attainment among these at-risk youth. Gender and race/ethnicity differences are explored, policy and research recommendations are offered.

Introduction

Living in resource strained and dangerous neighborhoods can have a negative effect on youth: perpetuating a cycle of poverty, violence, and academic failure (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Yet, despite the risks and challenges of living in such stressful situations not all youth will remain in poverty or become embroiled in crime, drugs, or violence. This study is about a group of at-risk residents that "beat the odds" and proved their resilience through college attendance and desistance from gangs and crime. More specifically, this study aims to show how mentoring of urban youth living in dangerous neighborhoods was a protective factor fostering their resilience and educational success. This study reviews the literature on the topics surrounding barriers to educational success, mentoring, and resilience of at-risk youth. In the coming pages I discuss the current study, results, conclusions, and policy implications for fostering resilience of at-risk youth living in dangerous neighborhoods.

Barriers to Educational Success

Studies on educational attainment of urban youth residing in highly impoverished and strained neighborhoods have found that lower socioeconomic status, parental educational attainment (i.e., lack of a high school diploma and/or college education), high levels of crime, and "unstable households," (i.e., abuse in the home, single parent households) often have negative effects on educational attainment and educational aspirations of youth (Ou & Reynolds, 2008; South, Baumer, & Lutz, 2003). These characteristics of living in strained neighborhoods are often associated with high levels of school dropout rates, low GPA, involvement in delinquent/criminal behaviors and a lack of college attendance for urban youth (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Ou & Reynolds, 2008; South, Baumer, & Lutz, 2003). However, one way in which youth have overcome these risk factors is through resilience promoted by protective/promotive factors that buffer the negative effects of strained neighborhoods (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005; Ungar, 2004; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002; Zimmerman, Stoddard, Eisman, Cladwell, Aiyer, & Miller, 2013). To better understand the effects of protective and promotive factors associated with resilience of at-risk youth, we shift our focus to resilience theory.

Theoretical Framework

Resilience research focuses on overcoming the negative effects of adverse events and dangerous environments, in an individual's life. When resilience is at work, it promotes the avoidance of the typical trajectories of risk. According to resilience theory, this is usually achieved through protective or promotive factors (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar & Goldstein, 2004; Werner, 1993). Therefore, resilience theory is often used as a framework to guide studies on at-risk youths' successful adaptation through strained resources and stressful circumstances. In other words, resilience theory can help explain how youth from stressful backgrounds manage to become productive adults via their ability to be adaptive to risky situations. According to Ungar (2004), resilience theory can be applied to understand the characteristics that make an individual resilient and/or the mechanisms by which an individual becomes resilient.

Ferguson and Zimmerman (2005) found promotive and protective factors can be both personal attributes and outside influences that buffer the negative effects of living in a strained neighborhood. Identification of moderating factors is important because living in strained neighborhoods is associated with numerous emotional and developmental difficulties ranging from anxiety, academic failure, criminal behavior, and violence (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005). According to many scholars, when a promotive or protective factor, such as mentoring, is available to at-risk youth this is known as the protective factor model of resilience (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar & Goldstein, 2004; Ungar, 2004; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002; Zimmerman, Stoddard, Eisman, Cladwell, Aiyer, & Miller, 2013). Promotive or protective factors, also known as resources or assets, can neutralize or reduce risk among

at-risk youth inoculating them against academic failure, criminal behavior, and violence (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar & Goldstein, 2004; Ungar, 2004; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer & Notaro, 2002; Zimmerman, Stoddard, Eisman, Cladwell, Aiyer, & Miller, 2013).

Research on the subject of resilience is primarily from psychology, psychiatry, public health, social work, and education. Continual changes in the understanding of how to keep at-risk youth from criminal and deviant behavior have allowed the disciplines of sociology and criminology to add to this literature. Resilience scholars have noted that the process of resilience is likely to be different across socioeconomic statuses, races and ethnicities, as well as different personal experiences (Arrington & Wilson, 2000; Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005). Therefore, the impact of mentors on different groups of at-risk youth (i.e., male, female, Hispanic/Latino, and Black/African-American) from Camden city such as what is being examined in this study is important as it can serve as another data point on the perceptions of achieving resilience even in the most unlikely of places.

Role of Mentoring in Resilience of At-Risk Youth

According to DuBois and Karcher (2005), mentoring relationships have been an important part of at-risk youth's desistance from criminal behaviors. Furthermore, at-risk individuals with mentoring relationships experience an increased feeling of self-esteem and this further contributes to their resilience. Mentoring acts as a protective factor to the negative influences in the youth's environment. Multiple studies have also found an important link between mentoring and resilience as well as mentoring and educational attainment of at-risk youth (Eby et al., 2007; Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009; Fruiht & Wray-Lake, 2012; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Sanchez, Esparza, & Colon, 2008; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Southwick et al, 2007; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002; Zimmerman, Caldwell, Hurd, & Sanchez, 2012).

Mentoring (formal or informal) appears to buffer the negative effects of poverty and crime by providing emotional and educational support to the youth. This protective element allows the youth to avoid criminal or deviant behavior and achieve academically (Eby et al., 2007; Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009; Fruiht & Wray-Lake, 2012; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Sanchez, Esparza, & Colon, 2008; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Southwick et al., 2007; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002; Zimmerman, Caldwell, Hurd, & Sanchez, 2012).

Levine and Nidiffer (1996) found that poverty, gender, race, religion, geography, and exposure to high levels of crime and violence are all barriers to educational success for at-risk youth. Nonetheless, the researchers found that having a special person in a youth's life (i.e., mentors) often encouraged educational success despite all of these

barriers. In fact, mentors were identified as the most influential factor to educational success (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Once again, it appears that the mentors buffered the negative risks of living in a strained neighborhood. These "mentors" may have created an early escape route from poverty by providing at-risk youth with educational resources and support necessary to perform better academically.

Several other studies have found that at-risk youth with a mentor (in these cases a non-kin mentor) were more likely to have positive academic outcomes and less negative behaviors than their counterparts without mentors (Eby et al., 2007; Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009; Southwick et al., 2007; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001). Experts attribute these positive outcomes primarily to the support and encouragement they received from their mentors. Furthermore, Fruiht and Wray-Lake (2012) found mentors who were the respondent's kin or from community organizations, compared to a mentor from an educational institution, were most important to the respondent's academic success before and after high school. Results suggested that the presence of the mentor and the mentor's support provided the youth with the confidence and ability to perform well academically in high school (Fruiht & Wray-Lake, 2012). Additionally, these positive effects gave the respondents the confidence and desire to continue their education and move on to college (Fruiht & Wray-Lake, 2012).

Sanchez, Esparza, and Colon (2008) examined the effect of mentoring within the Latino community and whether it was impactful on the academic performance of youth. Results indicated that youth with at least one self-reported mentor had higher educational expectations than their counterparts without mentors. In this study a mentor was often a family member or even a friend, and not a mentor assigned from a program or public

institution. Similarly, Zimmerman, Caldwell, Hurd, and Sanchez (2012) studied 541 academically at-risk youth to understand if and how informal mentors may impact a youth's academic achievement. Outcome data found that youth with a mentor had more long-term educational goals than those youth without a mentor.

Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) used survey data and ethnographic perspectives to understand the effect of mentors on urban Mexican adolescents in California. The study uncovered that mentors existed in the lives of the most resilient youth. The researchers also found that mentors who came into the lives of youth on a path towards criminal and deviant behavior were able to change the negative trajectory of these youths' lives. Therefore, the researchers concluded that mentors provided the needed emotional support to these at-risk youth to enable them to successfully further their education in meaningful ways.

In sum, these data suggest that the presence of a promotive or a protective factor in the form of a mentor is important to the resilience of at-risk youth. This finding is important because youth living in strained and resource-deprived neighborhoods have few opportunities to "beat the odds." However, as these findings suggest, the presence of a mentor appears to help at-risk youth adapt and become successful despite many obstacles. A mentor seems to provide essential emotional and educational support. The mentor may actually turn the trajectory of a youth's life away from crime and deviance and instead towards academic success and resilience. The current study examines the perceptions of how informal and formal mentors helped promote resilience and college attendance among a sample of at-risk youth from Camden, New Jersey, despite living in dangerous neighborhoods and many self-identified adverse childhood experiences.

Current Study

Before going into my findings I want to explain the methodology of this study, provide information about my project, and share descriptive statistics about the sample. To begin, I am involved in a much larger mixed methods research study investigating the educational, social, familial, communal, and protective factors that may have impacted the college attendance of Camden city residents. The larger study was IRB approved and its data collection lasted approximately three and a half years (2013-2017). The study involved a non-random sample of Rutgers University students who grew up in Camden, New Jersey. Respondents were interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires and completed surveys. In total, 160 respondents participated in the larger study.

Recruiting efforts were executed on a pre-determined schedule and included traditional measures (i.e., public notifications and postings across campus and the dorms asking for participation) and nontraditional tactics (i.e., giving away cookies and sweets in the campus center to promote awareness of the study). Snowball sampling was also used, as many of the adults who were interviewed knew other individuals who also grew up in Camden and attended Rutgers University.

The respondents (N=160) answered interview and survey questions retrospectively regarding their memories as a child, teenager, and young adult growing up in Camden city. Many of the respondents still resided in the city and could compare for the interviewers their past experiences to their present experiences of living in Camden. The average length of the interviews was 80 minutes and the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Coding was conducted via NVivo and interviews were coded following the interview guide as well as looking for emergent themes. Dual coders were used for inter-

rater reliability.

While participating in the data collection, transcription, and analysis phases of the project, I noticed the recurring theme of mentors within the success stories of respondents. I obtained permission from the Principal Investigator to do this independent analysis on the respondents' perceptions of mentoring. Therefore, the current study uses data from a sub-sample (n=40) of the larger study (N=160) to understand the respondents' perceptions of how mentors influenced the educational attainment of at-risk urban youth who had experienced many adverse childhood experiences. The primary research questions of this study are, "What do participants' perceive as the effect of mentors on encouraging and supporting their college attendance "against the odds"?" Secondarily "What type(s) of support do respondents' attribute to their mentors?" Third "Does the race/ethnicity and/or gender of the respondent make a difference in mentor type or support attributed to the mentor?"

For inclusion in my study, participants must have answered yes to the interview question "Did you have a mentor or someone to look up to?" Further, they must have also elaborated on the person(s) and the merit and impact of this mentoring relationship. This inclusion criterion came directly from the questionnaire used in the much larger research project. However, the entirety of the transcript was also mined to fully understand the mentoring relationship. Therefore, the transcripts selected for analysis in this study (n=40) shared the common theme of an influential mentor in the respondent's academic success and resilience.

For this study, a mentor was defined as an individual who offers guidance or instruction to allow for the growth and development of the mentee. An emotional bond

must also be present (DuBois & Karcher, 2005). It is also important to note that the respondents in the larger study (N=160) and this subsample (n=40) were able to interpret the term "mentor" in whatever way seemed most appropriate to their circumstances. There were no suggestions or probes in the interview guide as to who should be considered a mentor. Thus, respondents may have had different perceptions as to what the term mentor meant to them.

These 40 interviews were deliberately selected from the overall sample of eligible cases to ensure variability in race, ethnicity, and gender. Therefore, for every Hispanic/Latino female that was selected a similarly situated male respondent was also selected. The same approach was used for Black/African-American respondents. However, among the racial/ethnic category labeled "other" the matching was less precise (i.e., two Asian male respondents, one female Asian respondent, two Caucasian female respondents, and one respondent who self-identified as Hispanic/Latino and Black/African-American). This selection approach highlighting variability among respondents will hopefully add an understanding of how these social constructs interact with the mentor's ability to protect against physical and psychological harm as well as encourage college attendance within this high-risk population. A primary goal of this study was to understand the perceptions of how a mentor(s) can function as a protective factor, and how this varies across not only gender, but also racial and ethnic categories. The expectation is that the results of this study will further our understanding of important mentoring issues.

After the inclusion process for this secondary data analysis was complete, mentors were coded as formal mentors and informal mentors. A formal mentor was an individual

who came from a structured entity such as an organization or program. Examples of these "structured entities" included religious institutions, educational settings, and community programs. In contrast, an informal mentor is operationalized as a relationship that forms from a youth's inner circle and daily life. Examples of informal mentors included parents, extended family members, and friends. Using the totality of the interview and these operationalized terms, I determined if the mentor was classified as formal mentor, informal mentor, or if both types were present. For the purposes of this study, pseudonyms were given to all respondents who are quoted.

Site of the Study: **At-Risk Youth and Adverse Childhood Experiences**

To better understand the lives of these respondents, details of the city where the respondents lived will be described as well as an overview of the respondents' adverse childhood experiences. The research site is the City of Camden located in New Jersey. By most accounts, Camden is a strained city with many poverty-stricken neighborhoods. Residents often reside there simply because they cannot afford to live anywhere else. According to U.S. Census data (2012), Camden was reported to be the poorest city in the nation and simultaneously received the dubious distinction of "America's Most Dangerous City" (CQ Press, 2012). The U.S. Census (2015) reported that slightly more than half of the children residing in Camden live at or below the poverty line and nearly 40% of all the city's residents fall within this same economic bracket. Furthermore, nearly two-fifths of the residents in Camden live in female-headed households (U.S. Census, 2015). This is significantly higher than the national average of 13% female-headed households (U.S. Census, 2015). I mention these issues because these factors are often associated with additional strains and risks for children.

College graduation rates of Camden city residents also remain painfully low at nearly 8% (U.S. Census, 2015). This is far lower than the national average, which is nearly 30% (U.S. Census, 2015). Finally, the city's public high school statistics are not impressive either. According to the New Jersey Department of Education (2015, 2016), the city's graduation rate hovered around 55%, while the state average was closer to 90%. As alluded to earlier, Camden is also infamous for being a consistent top contender for "America's Most Dangerous City" for nearly a decade (Morgan Quinto, 2004-2006; CQ Press, 2007-2012). According to UCR statistics, the rates of crime and violence in the

city are still among the highest in the nation despite an improvement in the years of 2013-

2015. Furthermore, there are no communities within the city that are safe havens from

violence. All 19-census tracts within the city limits have violent crime rates (from a low

of 1262.45 offenses per 100,000 residents to a high of 4737.13 offenses per 100,000

residents) that far exceed the national average rate of violence (372.6 offenses per

100,000 inhabitants) (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016).

In addition to these macro level risk factors, respondents discussed a myriad of

adverse childhood experiences that placed them at-risk for harm. For instance, all 40

respondents in this subsample discussed exposure to community violence. Three of the

40 respondents discussed witnessing lethal shootings on the streets near their home.

Many more discussed hearing gunfire on a regular basis in their neighborhood. A

handful of respondents noted that at least one of their parent(s) was a drug dealer and/or

gang member. As a result of this parental connection to drugs and gangs, the respondent's

homes were targets for burglaries. Further, several respondents spoke of living in fear of

being assaulted on the streets of Camden, or in some way harmed, by other city residents.

While most of the respondents said they resided near criminal and deviant activity, nearly

half of the respondents also had to contend with family members (usually aunts, uncles,

and cousins) who were addicted to drugs, alcohol, and/or had severe mental illness.

While these were usually extended family members as opposed to parents or siblings, the

respondents described them as integral to the family structure. Therefore, the struggles of

these family members generated stress and concern among the respondents. For a host of

different reasons including the death of a custodial parent, criminal behavior of a

custodial parent, substance abuse, or severe mental illness, 4 out of the 40 respondents

(10%) were removed from their homes and placed with another family member or in foster care (2 out of the 4 respondents). Finally, 15 out of the 40 (38%) respondents indicated that they were forced to move out of a home because their parent(s) could not afford it and that there were times in their childhood when they went without heat or food due to a lack of finances.

Sample Characteristics

The demographics of the subsample were analyzed to highlight potential differences in gender and race/ethnicity among the respondents. Respondents who self-identified as male accounted for 50% of the sample and had a mean age of 27. Respondents who self-identified as female accounted for the other 50% of the subsample and also had a mean age of 27. The mean age of the subsample is older than the larger study's sample, whose respondents were mostly in the 18-24 years old age range. The subsample was 50% Hispanic/Latino(a) (20 out of the 40 respondents), 35% Black/African-American (14 out of the 40 respondents), and 15% "other" (6 out of the 40 respondents) (e.g., Caucasian, Asian, and more than one race/ethnicity).

My subsample is reflective of the larger sample which has more Hispanic/Latino(a) respondents than African-American respondents (See Table 1). Not surprisingly, only 17%[1] of the respondents (7 out of the 40 respondents) attended their traditional feeder schools compared to 83% who attended non-feeder high schools (33 out of the 40 respondents) including public schools in neighboring cities/towns or a specialty public, private, charter, or parochial school. The fact that 83% of the participants self-selected out of their feeder high schools (which were perceived by respondents as dangerous and educationally inferior) could imply that participants had persons who provided extra support or took a special interest in the respondent's education to assist or encourage them in attending these "better" non-feeder high schools.

Table 1

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[1] Rules of rounding used for all percentages.

Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population (n=40)		
Characteristic	*Percent/Raw Numbers*	
Racial/Ethnic Group		
Black/African-American	35%	(14)
Hispanic/Latino(a)	50%	(20)
Other	15%	(6)
Gender		
Female	50%	(20)
Male	50%	(20)
High School Type		
Feeder Schools (Public Schools)	17%	(7)
Non-Feeder Schools	83%	(33)

A slight minority of the subsample had already completed at least one post-secondary degree. More specifically, (45%) of the respondents in this subsample (18 out of the 40 respondents) had completed their bachelor's degree at the time of the interview. These non-undergraduate students were either alumni (9 respondents out of 18) or current graduate students (9 out of the 18 respondents) at Rutgers University. This advanced educational status is likely connected to the mean age of the subsample, as it is slightly older than is common for undergraduate students. The advanced educational status of respondents nearly matches the larger sample. More specifically, 75 respondents or 47% of the full sample (N=160) had already completed their bachelor's degree. Among the undergraduates in the subsample, 17% were freshman, 18% were sophomores, 10% were juniors and 10% were seniors. (See Table 2). In an attempt to explore the possibility of a gender effect in mentoring, my subsample is deliberately split along gender lines – i.e., 50% males and 50% females whereas the larger sample was comprised of 63% female and 37% male respondents.

With regard to childhood living arrangements, slightly more than half of the subsample (21 out of the 40 respondents) lived in two parent/guardian households. All

21 of these households had a female present (e.g., mother, grandmother, aunt). All but one of these two parent/guardian households (20 of the 21 two parent households) had a mother living with the respondent. On occasion, the mother was raising her child with the aid of the child's grandmother or aunt. However, in 18 of these 21 two parent households the father was also living with the child.

Just under half of the subsample 48% (19 out of the 40 respondents) lived in a single adult headed household. Eighteen of the 19 single adult headed households had a female present (16 mothers and 2 grandmothers). One single adult headed household was comprised of a father only. Therefore, 36 out of the 40 respondents (90%) lived with their mothers and 19 out of the 40 respondents (48%) resided with their father.

Slightly more than half the respondents in the sub-sample reported (22 out of the 40 respondents, or 55%) that they had at least one parent who graduated from high school or had obtained a GED. Parental college attendance information was not uniformly available.

Table 2

Educational Status of the Study Population (n=40)

Characteristic	*Percent/ Raw Numbers*	
Year in College		
Freshman	17.5%	(7)
Sophomore	17.5%	(7)
Junior	10%	(4)
Senior	10%	(4)
Post Undergraduate	45%	(18)

Results

It was determined that 65% of the respondents had informal mentors (26 out of the 40 respondents) and 35% (14 out of the 40 respondents) had formal mentors. Irrespective of the type of mentor (informal or formal), respondents described their mentors as people that took a special interest in not only their educational success, but also their personal well-being. In fact, collectively 80% or 32 out of the 40 respondents stated that their mentor was influential specifically in helping them attain their educational goal of college attendance and succeeding personally.

The most common informal mentor (92%) was a family member (primarily mothers). The second most common informal mentor was a friend or acquaintance (8% or 2 out of the 26 respondents). Additionally, when disaggregated by mentor type, 88% (23 out of the 26 respondents with informal mentors) of respondents in this group indicated their mentor was crucial to the respondent's academic and personal success.

Among the formal mentor category the most common type of mentor was an individual associated with community programs, including Urban Promise and Community Adolescents Striving for Achievement (CASA). More specifically, 50% (7 out of the 14 respondents) were associated with a community program. The second most common category of formal mentors (36% or 5 of the 14 respondents) were from educational institutions (i.e., teachers and staff). The third most common category of formal mentors was individuals from religious organizations/programming (i.e., ministers/pastors or congregants) (14% or 2 out of the 14 respondents).

When disaggregated by mentor type, 64% (9 out of the 14 respondents) stated that his or her formal mentor was crucial in supporting the respondent's academic and

personal success. Proportionally, more informal mentors (88% or 23 out of the 26) than formal mentors (64% or 9 out of the 14) were perceived by respondents as crucial to their own academic and personal success. Still, respondents overwhelmingly viewed both types of mentors favorably.

Informal Mentors

As previously stated, the most common type of mentor (65%) was an informal one. Within this category, 24 out of the 26 (92%) respondents indicated that their informal mentor was a relative (i.e., 12 mothers, 5 fathers, 3 sisters, 1 grandmother, 1 grandfather, 1 cousin, and 1 uncle). Friends and associates came in a distant second, with only 2 respondents out of 26 (8%) indicating a friend or acquaintance was an informal mentor.

Most of the respondents who identified an informal mentor were female. This gender effect appears despite the fact that the subsample is evenly split along gender lines. Of the 26 respondents who identified an informal mentor, 17 were female (65%) and only 9 were male (35%). Further, nearly all of the female respondents in this mentoring study (85% or 17 out of the 20 females) indicated they had an informal mentor. Only 3 of the 20 females (15%) in this study had a formal mentor.

When examining the race/ethnicity of the respondents who identified an informal mentor, the results show that a higher proportion of Black/African-American respondents - 78% (11 out of the 14) - compared with Hispanic/Latino(a) respondents - 60% (12 out of the 20) - had informal mentors. Finally, 50% of the " other" racial category (3 of the 6 respondents e.g., Caucasian, Asian, and one respondent self-identified as more than one race) had informal mentors.

Recall that, according to the respondents, having a mentor was important to their pathway to college. For example, informal mentors were credited by respondents as providing them with many of the resources they needed for schooling, an indication that the educational success of the respondent was important to the informal mentors.

Ensuring that the respondents had the "tools" to fulfill their dream of a college education was an overarching theme within the discussions about informal mentors.

The informal mentors utilized many mechanisms to support the respondent's educational ambitions such as providing emotional support, tutors to assist with schoolwork, supervision of the respondent to confirm completion of homework and other relevant schoolwork, and periodic meetings with teachers. The quote below is from Emily, a 26-year-old Hispanic/Latina female. Like most of the respondents in this study, Emily's life was not always an easy one. Emily's best friend was murdered and several of her other friends succumbed to the violence, gangs, and drugs of the streets of Camden. Also, she stated that the home she shared with her mother was burglarized on more than one occasion. She discussed how traumatic these events were for her. Emily identified her mother as her mentor and described how her mother provided her with the educational resources and emotional support Emily needed to succeed in school even while residing in a high-risk neighborhood.

> "My mom, I thank God every day for her, she was like you want to learn new words--look it up. By the time I was six, I read the whole dictionary. There were just certain things that my mom made sure I knew how to do. So, if I was to say anybody influenced me in anyway to aspire me to do the things I want to do, I picked it up from her."

Clearly, Emily's mother was a strong positive influence on Emily's development and success.

Analysis of the transcripts revealed that most of the respondents were especially close to their family members. Also, these respondents revealed in the interviews that family members were protective of them. Examples of the aforementioned protectiveness included respondents not being permitted to play outside of the home

unless it was within stipulated parameters (i.e., "on this block where I can see you" or "only on the front stoop of the house"). Mentors did not want the respondents to fall into the dangers or the temptations of the streets and thus maintained tight restrictions on when and where and with whom the respondent could socialize.

The following is example of a respondent with an informal mentor (his father) who prioritized keeping his son out of harm's way, which the respondent credited with his resilience and pathway to college. Zack, a 31-year-old Black/African-American male grew up in close proximity to several family members who engaged in criminal activity and used drugs. Some relatives with whom Zack was close were incarcerated. Zack was not insulated from the illicit activities; however, his father/informal mentor helped protect him from the crime and deviance around him.

> "Because he [respondent's father] used to be the **role model** citizen. He had the American dream, married, kids, dog, and a house. Worked two jobs and supported his family and all of that. And went through hell and high water to make sure everybody was taken care of. You know he helped me with the concept of needs and wants."

As you can see, Zack perceived his father as not only his mentor, but also as his role model. This "role model" perception of mentors was common among the characterization of mentors by the male respondents. The use of the term "role model" in place of "mentor" was not found among the female respondent's descriptions of mentors. Given conventional notions of masculinity, males referring to a mentor as a "role model" may be less threatening to traditional notions of masculinity where needing or accepting help can be viewed as a weakness and more akin to femininity than masculinity.

Here is another example of how a respondent spoke of her informal mentor. Stephanie, a 19-year-old Hispanic/Latina female, has suffered a lot of tragedy in her

young life. As the quote below reveals, she credits her mentor (her grandmother) for her

resilience and academic success. Stephanie's own mother died of a drug overdose after

battling mental illness and her father, who also suffered from mental illness, committed

suicide when Stephanie was a young girl. After her father's untimely death, Stephanie

resided in several foster homes before her grandmother became her primary caretaker and

legal guardian. When asked how her grandmother, who was Stephanie's informal

mentor, supported her educational aspirations she told the interviewer:

> "Well, she [respondent's grandmother] loves education more than anything and I
> do too. I think it is the most important thing in someone's life. And without her I
> think a lot of my life wouldn't be what it is. Like my dad was going to put me in
> public school in Camden and she was like 'don't do that.' I was reading early
> because of her. She taught me to read before I started kindergarten. She started
> teaching me how to read and when my Dad would come to get me she would tell
> him I was able to read. My Dad was like 'no, she cannot [read].' She was like, 'sit
> down with her and read this book with her and she'll read it with you.' You know
> he was surprised and he kept reading with me. So it was little things in the
> beginning that changed my life so much."

According to Emily, Zack, and Stephanie, and the others in this group, informal

mentors supported the respondents emotionally and educationally. These informal

mentors encouraged the respondents to keep working hard in school. Respondents stated

that the informal mentors supplied invaluable support towards their educational pursuits.

These mentors fostered positive outlets and behaviors and allowed the respondents to see

a future that was not defined by the violence, drugs, and poverty of their neighborhoods.

To conclude, these data indicate that the respondents had a strong relationship

with their families. This fact, combined with the protective measures and restrictions

placed on respondents, may explain why they had more family members as mentors

compared to other possible alternatives. If gender socialization is at work in the homes of

these respondents as it is in many other places, the gendered pattern among informal

mentors – 17 of the 26 respondents (65%) with informal mentors were female – may also be associated with the fact that female children and adolescents are often required to stay closer to home than their male counterparts.

Formal Mentors

Formal mentors were present in 35% of the subsample (14 out of the 40 respondents). The formal mentor category has a gendered pattern, as does the informal mentors category. In this case, however, the respondents are overwhelmingly male. In other words, 11 of the 20 males - 55% - had formal mentors, compared to only 15% (3 out of 20 respondents) of the females. Thus, males were more than 3.5 times more likely than females to have a formal mentor rather than an informal mentor.

 When further examining the formal mentor category differences were also observed between racial/ethnic groups. Eight of the 20 Hispanic/Latino(a) respondents had a formal mentor which is 40% of this racial group. The proportion of Black/African-American respondents that had a formal mentor is 21% (3 out of the 14 Black/African-American respondents) and the proportion of the "other" ethnic category with formal mentors is 50% (3 of the 6 respondents e.g., Caucasian, Asian, and one respondent self-identified as more than one race). Thus, Hispanics/Latino(a) respondents and those classified as "other" were nearly twice as likely as Black/African-American respondents to have a formal mentor.

Formal mentors fell into three categories. The first category of formal mentors, which was also the most common type of formal mentor were individuals from community programs including Urban Promise and Community Adolescents Striving for Achievement (CASA). Fifty percent (7 out of the 14 respondents) indicated that their mentor was associated with a community program. Six of the 7 respondents in this group specifically discussed their connections with the community program that allowed them to cultivate a relationship with their mentor. One respondent indicated he met his mentor

through an organization that was providing a scholarship opportunity. Another respondent indicated he met his mentor after he was "tricked" by his friends to attend choir practice at a community organization; however, after arriving at the organization, his friends convinced him to join and he agreed. This community organization connection resulted in his mentoring relationship with his formal mentor. Two individuals in this group of 7 stated that they met their mentor while they were incarcerated (at different correctional institutions). Lastly, one participant encountered his mentor by attending a summer camp for Camden city residents that provides access to activities such as camping, hiking, swimming, and boating.

The second most common type of formal mentor was from educational institutions (i.e., teachers, guidance counselors, and other staff members) accounting for 36% (5 out of the 14 respondents) of the formal mentors. Religious institutions such as pastors from local churches and programs through religious organizations such as the Pathfinders Club were also represented among the formal mentor categories (14% or 2 out of the 14 respondents). Examples of how formal mentors assisted and supported the college endeavors of the respondents are discussed below.

Formal Mentors Through Community-Based Organizations

Formal mentors from organizations located within the community accounted for 50% (7 out of the 14 respondents) of the formal mentors. All seven of these respondents that identified formal mentors at community organizations were male. In many cases, the mentors were from Urban Promise and Community Adolescents Striving for Achievement (CASA). Formal mentors were able to provide emotional and academic support to assist respondents with their pathway to college.

Mark, a 29-year-old Black/African-American male had a tumultuous upbringing due to his physically abusive father and his struggle with his own sexuality. However, at the age of 17 years old, Mark was trying to "come out" with his sexuality publicly. Mark met his mentor in a community program in Camden and his mentor provided him the emotional support that was lacking in his self-described abusive home.

> "She [mentor] met me when I was 17 and I was coming out and coming through the thick of it, really depressed. I felt like my father was physically abusive because he didn't know how to deal with the fact that his wife of twenty-three years was gone. She [mentor] just really invested in me. She really helped me to see I'm capable of having support and being loved and understood…She was patient, she was selfless. She just embodied what a good mentor is."

The takeaway in Mark's case was that his formal mentor was a key protective buffer from the strains and struggles in his life.

Formal mentors from community programming in Camden were said to have provided critical information about how to successfully navigate the college application process. Most of the formal mentors who were associated with community programs in the city were college graduates. Brian, a 19-year-old Hispanic/Latino male indicated that his formal mentor provided him integral knowledge and insights about the college application process. This information was not readily available to Brian, as his parents did not attend college. Furthermore, Brian's father was not present in his life and his stepfather was a gang member and drug dealer who abused Brian and Brian's mom. Brian credits his mentor with saving his life and keeping him on the right path and out of trouble. At one point, Brian was contemplating killing his stepfather to stop the abuse and to protect his mom, but his mentor steered him toward a different path. To that end, Brian identified this intervention as the key turning point in his life, which ultimately made the difference in his ability to attend college.

"So actually seeing someone who went to college gave me that push like okay, I can do this it's not impossible. Then he started showing me the process of how to get into college and how to present yourself. [Mentor's name] was the one who taught me to do everything like that because you don't have someone at home doing it for you. That's how he influenced me, showing me the process, showing me how this really works."

These excerpts demonstrate the positive perceptions respondents have of their formal mentors from community programs and how the formal mentors filled an important void in their lives.

Formal Mentors in Educational Settings

Thirty-six percent (5 out of the 14 respondents) within the formal mentor group were from educational settings. These include teachers, guidance counselors, principals, and other school staff. Among those who had formal mentors, men were more likely than women to say that their mentor came from an educational setting (29% vs. 7%).

When speaking of their educational mentors, respondents discussed how the mentors helped them with school related difficulties as well as problems out of school. Formal mentors also connected with the respondents on a personal level oftentimes coming from the same type of strained neighborhoods or troubled homes as the respondent.

Daniel, a 21-year-old Asian male, illustrates an example of a formal mentor from an educational setting. Daniel was sent to the United States to escape a war torn country by living with a family friend in the hopes of achieving a better life. Daniel grew up with guardians who were not related to him. He slept in the basement and tried to acclimate to life in America both from a cultural standpoint as well as learning to speak and read English. He worked hard in school to earn good grades so he could attend college. Daniel indicated to the interviewer how his high school principal impacted his drive for a better

future. Below is a short excerpt from Daniel's interview (edited for space).

> "Right before I went to college [respondent's high school principal] asked me to come in and she gave me college supplies, you know, books, toothpaste stuff like that, lamps, you know college stuff. And then before that she also made sure I did my college applications and I took my SATs. Keeping track of where I am. It felt good to have someone looking after you."

The interviewer then asks Daniel why his high school principal was so involved in his education and Daniel's response allows us a peek into their deep connection.

> "I think the first time we met was after school. I couldn't find a place to do my homework so she let me use her office…. So whatever after school program I was in, it got cancelled and when you are going to school far like that (respondent went to school outside of Camden City) you have to take the bus. She just said I could sit in her office and do my homework while she worked in there too. So I'm pretty sure she doesn't do that for everyone but…I think it was a rare occasion that she ended up talking to me and I'm telling her how I grew up and everything. So I remember somehow we got connected. I mean we still connect today. I still visit her once and awhile. And then she told me how she got to be where she is and how she struggled to get her masters and PhD. It just impressed me how people work. You know it really doesn't need to be a full 5 years a full 6 years. It can be longer. It can take you until you are 30 to get that degree that you wanted. It's that goal in life that you want to get to. Even though you have a job already. That is what impresses me."

Daniel, like many of the respondents in this study, received assistance from his formal mentor with his college application process. Information shared by the mentors with the respondents included, but was not limited to, what tests to complete and when to take them, assistance with personal statements, letters of recommendations, and so forth. This mentoring was pivotal to the respondent's pathway to college, as without this knowledge the respondents would have struggled to navigate the complex college admissions process.

Formal Mentors Through Religious Organizations

Religious organizations such as the Pathfinders Club as well as individuals such as pastors and ministers from local churches were represented among the formal mentor

category (14% or 2 out of the 14 respondents). According to the respondents, these formal mentors not only encouraged their college attendance, but also gave them the strength through God to carry on through stressful situations and with their education. From Mary, a 19-year-old Hispanic/Latina female, we gain insight into how her mentor shared strength, encouragement, and emotional support to assist in her educational achievement "against the odds." Mary resided in a public housing complex where crime and violence were daily occurrences. She stated that there were also large open drug markets located just a few hundred feet from her front door.

> "My pastor was really influential in my life and she also was influential on my spiritual guidance like how the Holy Spirit influences the heart and mind of a person and how we should rely on him because we don't have control over bad situations…She was also very strong and she came off very strong on the topic of college. She had gone to college in Puerto Rico and to the continental United States to become a teacher. She always said 'why have the capacity and not do it. You have the capacity to do it and can make a difference. You can always get the ball rolling on going to college'."

Formal mentors from religious institutions were able to help the respondents mitigate the risks associated with living in crime ridden and heavily impoverished neighborhoods. Their religious teachings and personal stories of triumph were inspirational and offered a path towards overcoming the obstacles of growing up in the City of Camden and gaining admission into college.

Discussion

What conclusions can be drawn from this study? To begin, informal mentors (26 out of the 40 respondents) were more common than formal mentors (14 out of the 40 respondents) among the at-risk participants in this study. Given that informal mentors were nearly always relatives, this suggests a close and supportive family bond was likely present in the lives of the respondents with informal mentors. However, close family connections could also be present among the respondents within the formal mentor category, as their perceptions of a "mentor" may not have included family members. Additionally, irrespective of the type of mentor, 32 of the 40 respondents (80%) said that their mentor was crucial to their academic and personal success. Thus, nearly all of the participants in this study perceived their mentor as an integral part of their educational success.

Both groups of mentors appeared to have gendered patterns of participation. To illustrate, female respondents within the sample were more likely to have an informal mentor (85% or 17 out of 20 female respondents) compared with having a formal mentor (15% or 3 out of the 20 female respondents). Male respondents were slightly more likely to have a formal mentor (55% or 11 out of 20 male respondents) than an informal mentor (45% or 9 out of the 20 male respondents). Stated slightly differently, of the respondents that identified an informal mentor, 17 of the 26 were female (65%) and only 9 of the 26 were male (35%). Also, 11 of the 14 respondents (79%) that identified a formal mentor were male. Only 3 of the 14 respondents (21%) with a formal mentor were female.

With regard to participant's race and mentoring type, proportionally, African-Americans/Black respondents (78% or 11 out of the 14 Black respondents) were more

likely to have an informal mentor than Hispanic/Latino(a) respondents (60% or 12 out of the 20 Hispanic respondents).[2] In comparison, proportionally, Hispanic/Latino(a) respondents (40% or 8 out of the 20 Hispanic respondents) were more heavily represented within the formal mentoring category than their African-American /Black counterparts (21% or 3 out of the 14 Black respondents).[3]

When disaggregated by mentoring category, other distinctions emerge. For instance, respondents with informal mentors (i.e., nearly always family members and mostly mothers) described the use of restrictive and protective oversight by their mentors (i.e., family members). This often resulted in restrictions on respondents about not being allowed to go outside and rules about people with whom the respondent could associate. These protective measures were in place, according to respondents, due to the informal mentor's fear that the community violence and city residents would harm the respondent. In contrast, formal mentors (35% or 14 out of the 40 respondents) generally met their mentees out of the home. These encounters took place on basketball courts or in parks, churches, religious groups, and community programs.

Among those with a formal mentor, 50% (7 out of the 14 respondents) had met their mentor through a community organization or program. Six of the 7 respondents specifically discussed their entrée to the community programming that led to their connection to their mentors. The next most common type of formal mentor (36%) was associated with educational institutions and 14% of the formal mentors came from religious organizations. As noted earlier, there is a gendered pattern of participation among the respondents who had formal mentors: only 3 of the 14 (21%) respondents

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[2] The remaining 3 of the 26 respondents in the informal mentor group were from the "other" racial category.
[3] The remaining 3 of the 14 respondents in the formal mentor group were from the "other" racial category.

with formal mentors were female while 11 of the 14 (78%) respondents with formal

mentors were male. This gendered nature of mentoring is notable (e.g., as stated earlier

proportionally females are more likely to have informal mentors and males are more

likely to have formal mentors). This may be an indication that the male respondents were

not required to be in or near the home in the same way as their female counterparts.

Therefore, it is possible that this pattern of mentoring is based on socialization and

opportunity; thus, females find mentors within the home and males find mentors inside

and outside the home.

Another interesting gendered finding is that the male respondents (n=20) used the

terms "mentor" and "role model" interchangeably. This tendency did not occur among

the female respondents. Why? It may have been less threatening to male respondents'

conceptions of masculinity to say they have a "role model" versus saying they have a

"mentor." Calling their mentor a role model may have allowed the male respondents to

avoid feeling weak or in need of help (both are the antithesis of cultural notions of

masculinity) because of having a "mentor." Further analysis and research on mentoring is

needed to try and flesh these gender differences out.

All factors that promote college attendance amongst at-risk youth are important

because education can be a key factor to desisting from crime and violence and breaking

the cycle of poverty. Based on these perceptual findings it appears that mentoring may

be an essential component to assisting at-risk youth towards college attendance. Recall

that 32 out of the 40 respondents (80%) indicated that their mentor was crucial to their

pathway to college. It is also important to understand what encouraged the creation of

effective formal and informal mentoring relationships. As noted, if we can crack that

code we could give youth in high-risk situations a better chance at "beating the odds" and becoming academically and personally successful.

Other protective elements for at-risk youth include training for life skills, promoting self-efficacy and participation in extracurricular and/or community activities and academic skills (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005). An example of this is the Resource Adolescents program. This program focuses on enhancing adolescent skills and social resources. It teaches youth how to handle stress, affirm their skills, and assists them in developing social support networks and to conduct interpersonal relationships such as those with family members (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005). These lessons may enable at-risk youth to create mentoring relationships with influential people in their lives. Other possible protective solutions include education for parents and community members on effective support for youth in school and life (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005).

These interventions would also encourage the importance of secondary education. Interventions of these types already exist and can help families overcome multiple issues that occur from living in a strained neighborhood (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005). Programs such as the Flint Fathers and Sons Program, the Adolescents and Family Rites of Passage Program, and Familias Unidas are programs that assist families to encourage communication, support, and interaction with the child's school system and education (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005). A key to these programs is that they are culturally sensitive and prepared to deal with issues that occur within different cultures and races/ethnicities. These programs are also able to address some concerns and issues that are more prone to urban environments such as exposure to violence (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Ungar, 2004; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer,

& Notaro, 2002). These types of programs encourage the development of formal and informal mentoring relationships.

Sensitivity and cultural training for teachers is another way to assist in the resilience and college attendance of at-risk youth. This type of training assists teachers in better understanding the urban youth's situation in order to help the teacher make better connections with their students, possibly creating more mentoring relationships. (Alfaro, Umana-Taylor, & Bamaca, 2006; Israel, Beauleu, & Hartless, 2001; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2005).

In sum, the perceptual results in my study suggest mentoring was important in encouraging and supporting the educational and personal successes of these respondents. Finally, this study has one main limitation. Given its sample size and recruiting techniques, it is not possible to generalize these conclusions to other populations of at-risk youth who were resilient. This research is just the beginning when focusing on at-risk youth "beating the odds." More research needs to be done on this topic, as well as other factors related to youth success.

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