

Increasing Engagement and Retention Among At-Risk Youth in Police-Led Mentorship Programs*

Police-led mentorship programs are one approach communities use to support the healthy development of children and adolescents while also strengthening relationships between law enforcement and the communities they serve. In these programs, law enforcement officers serve as mentors and engage youth in structured academic, recreational, and community-based activities designed to foster positive development and protective factors. Existing research suggests that, when well designed and implemented, such programs can contribute to improved youth outcomes and more positive youth perceptions of police, although the overall evidence base remains limited and uneven.

Within a comprehensive system of student and learning supports, mentorship initiatives should be viewed as supplemental and prevention-oriented interventions rather than stand-alone solutions. Their effectiveness depends on attention to youth needs, program structure, mentor preparation, family engagement, and coordination with schools and community partners.

Who Are “At-Risk” Youth?

The term at-risk youth refers to children and adolescents whose learning, behavior, and development are jeopardized by adverse conditions such as economic hardship, exposure to trauma or violence, housing instability, unmet health or mental health needs, and limited access to academic and enrichment opportunities. Importantly, risk is not an inherent trait of youth; it reflects environmental and systemic barriers that interfere with development.

Effective supports emphasize reducing risks while strengthening protective factors. From an intrinsic motivational perspective, this call for enhancing feelings of connectedness with significant others, competence, and self-determination and reducing threats to such feelings (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

What the Research Says About Police-Led Mentorship

Mentoring reports suggest that consistent, supportive relationships with non-parental adults are associated with a range of positive developmental outcomes. Studies of school- and community-based mentoring suggest potential benefits such as:

- Modest improvements in academic engagement and school attendance
- Increased self-esteem and social competence
- Stronger communication and problem-solving skills
- Reductions in some high-risk behaviors

These outcomes appear strongest when mentoring relationships are stable, goal-oriented, and embedded in structured activities (Beier et al., 2000; Kremer et al., 2015; Liao & Sánchez, 2016). Police-led mentoring programs add an additional dimension by creating opportunities for youth to interact with officers in non-disciplinary contexts.

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The 2021 scoping review of law-enforcement mentoring programs by Stewart and DuBois reports limited but promising evidence that some law-enforcement mentoring initiatives may support positive youth outcomes and improve youth attitudes toward police. However, the review also emphasized important limitations, including a small number of rigorous evaluations, inconsistent outcome measures, and wide variation in program models and contexts.

Recent qualitative case studies highlight key features associated with positive program experiences, such as:

- Careful selection of officers who demonstrate empathy and interest in youth development
- Training that emphasizes relationship-building rather than enforcement
- Activities that expand youths' social and educational experiences
- Collaboration with families, schools, and community organizations

These findings suggest that how officers engage as mentors is critical to program success.

Common Challenges to Engagement and Retention

Like many after-school and community programs, police-led mentorship initiatives often struggle to sustain youth participation over time (Okeke, 2008). Barriers to engagement commonly include:

- Competing family responsibilities or employment demands
- Transportation and scheduling difficulties
- Activities that are poorly structured or misaligned with youths' interests
- Insufficient academic or emotional support
- Inconsistent mentor attendance or frequent staff turnover

Attrition is particularly likely when programs fail to provide meaningful roles for youth, clear expectations, or a sense of belonging

Evidence-Informed Strategies to Improve Retention

Research on mentoring and youth engagement points to several strategies that can strengthen participation and retention in police-led mentorship programs (Herrera et al., 2025; Liao & Sánchez, 2016; Stewart & DuBois, 2021). Here are key strategies:

- >**Clear goals and structure** – Programs benefit from explicitly defined purposes, expectations, and routines. Structured activities are more engaging than loosely organized or unplanned sessions.
- >**Reasonable mentor-to-youth ratios** – Smaller group formats or ratios (e.g., one mentor to three or four youth) can support stronger relationships while allowing peer interaction.
- >**Consistent and prepared mentors** – Retention improves when mentors participate regularly, receive ongoing training, and are supported through supervision and coaching. Continuity of relationships is especially important for youth experiencing instability.

- >**Youth voice and leadership opportunities** – Engagement increases when youth have input into activities and opportunities to build leadership, social, and life skills.
- >**Respectful, non-punitive interactions** – Officers are most effective as mentors when they are perceived as approachable, supportive, and distinct from their enforcement role. Programs should clearly separate mentoring from disciplinary functions.

Implications for Schools and Communities

Police-led mentorship programs should not be viewed as substitutes for comprehensive systems of student and learning supports. Rather, they are best understood as one component within a broader, integrated school–community framework designed to address academic, behavioral, social, emotional, and safety-related needs (Adelman & Taylor, 2017). From this perspective, the value of such programs depends on how well they are aligned with school improvement efforts, coordinated with existing community resources, and guided by shared goals for youth development.

Careful attention to program quality, equity, and role clarity is essential. Mentorship initiatives must be designed to complement – not fragment – existing supports and must operate in ways that are culturally responsive, voluntary, and clearly differentiated from law-enforcement or disciplinary functions. Without intentional coordination, even well-intended programs risk duplication, uneven access, or unintended negative effects.

Concluding Comments

Police-led mentorship programs have the potential to contribute to positive youth development while fostering more constructive relationships between law enforcement and the communities they serve. However, positive outcomes should not be assumed. Program effectiveness depends on intentional design, thoughtful selection and preparation of mentors, and consistent, relationship-centered engagement with youth. Programs that emphasize meaningful connections, well-structured and developmentally appropriate activities, and opportunities for youth voice are more likely to sustain participation and promote beneficial outcomes.

Ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement are critical. Schools and communities are encouraged to routinely examine participation patterns, monitor short- and longer-term outcomes, and actively solicit feedback from youth and families. Such data should be used not only to strengthen individual programs, but also to determine how police-led mentorship fits appropriately within a comprehensive, evolving system of student and learning supports.

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