

Police Mentoring of At-Risk Youth: Case Study of Police-Led Mentoring Program Leadership Development

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Abstract

Police-led organizations provide officers with the ability to mentor youth in a nurturing environment that empowers them to succeed academically, behaviorally, and socially. This article focuses on how police officers mentor youths in a major urban area in the southeast. A case study was presented of a police-led organization, which included in-depth interviews with program leaders and mentors, participant observations, and a review of secondary sources over 2 years. The main findings from the study are as follows: (1) program leaders emphasize that caring mentors need to be empathetic toward youth exposed to gun violence, (2) officers' previous experiences matter for their motivation to become mentors, and (3) officers stimulate students by taking them out of their usual social environments. This research expands the theoretical understanding of how police-led organizations influence the lives of youth exposed to gun violence. The characteristics of police officers who serve as mentors are crucial and can impact program outcomes. Practical implications for program leaders are discussed.

Keywords

police-led organization, mentorship, officers, social capital

Introduction

Law enforcement agencies adopt police-led organizations to establish a personalized relationship with youth (typically under 18 years of age). Mentors (i.e., the officers) act as role models, engaging the youth in various activities to promote and reinforce positive academic, behavioral, and social development. These activities range from participating in fun activities (such as arts, sports, music, and cooking) to having tough conversations about life choices in cases of duress (e.g., substance use, crime, and violence). The police visit the youth's home to ensure that their domestic life is conducive to positive growth (e.g., better academic achievement and personal discipline). In this manner, they enlist the help and support of the family (parents, grandparents, and siblings) to provide a holistic environment for the positive growth of the youth. Officers also establish broader community relations with the schools and youth community centers that can reinforce such growth.

In this article, the author undertakes an exploratory case study of a police-led organization in a major urban area in the southeast. The question asked in this article is: how do officers' approach to mentorship influence the success of police-led organizations? Specifically, the author considers the question as it relates to participating youth's academic, behavior, and social skills. Answering this question provides insights into how the mentors (i.e., police officers) are

making an impact on youths exposed to gun violence, to succeed academically, behaviorally, and socially. Police-led organizations are embedded within the law enforcement agencies, target youth exposed to gun violence, and are managed by law enforcement officers.

This paper seeks to gain a deeper understanding of officers' approach to mentoring through social capital theory (SCT). The basic notion of SCT is to invest in social relations as a form of capital, similar to physical and financial capital (Lin, 2017). Rooted in trusting networked relationships, SCT has proliferated in recent years as a strategy to tackle issues affecting individuals living in marginalized low-income neighborhoods (Coleman, 1988, 1994; Jencks, 1992; Lin, 2002; Putnam, 2002; Wilson, 2012). SCT plays an important role in ensuring that public organizations have both individual and social resources, as well as the potential for reducing the detrimental effects caused by a lack of supportive relationships (Laser & Leibowitz, 2009; Putnam, 1995).

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Fitzpatrick et al. (2005) argue that disadvantaged environments are related to the lack of supportive networks; an increase in human capital is positively associated with youth successfully navigating high-risk settings. This article thus provides a starting point for understanding the impact of police-led organizations on youths exposed to gun violence by building social capital.

The next section of this article provides an overview of the literature. After this, the article discusses the background and context, including a discussion of SCT. The article then presents the theoretical framework, research methodology, and themes that emerged from the case study. The article concludes with key factors that impact mentors' (i.e., officers') approach to mentoring. Briefly, the key factors of mentoring include the personal characteristics of officers, officers' previous experiences, and officers' desire to stimulate the mentees by expanding the social milieu of the children beyond their usual environment. Mentors play a key role in providing better academic, behavioral, and social opportunities.

Literature Review

Current literature suggests that in addition to being law enforcers, officers serve other roles such as mentors, teachers, and counselors (Beger, 2002; Brown, 2006; Jackson, 2002; James & McCallion, 2013). Specifically, officers serving as a mentor can become a resource for students impacted by gun violence and assist with identifying youths requiring additional academic, behavioral, and social support. As shown by Dewit et al. (2016) and Grossman et al. (2012), mentorship is positively associated with prominent academic achievement (e.g., school attendance, higher grade scores, and scholastic efficacy). Therefore, serving as a mentor allows officers to act as a conduit for overcoming ongoing academic failure and negative behaviors in youths while instilling a sense of legitimacy in marginalized communities (Arter, 2006).

Officers may also serve as a sounding board for students, a coach, or simply a role model who the students can interact with (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Travis III & Coon, 2005). As a mentor, police officers have an opportunity to interact with participants in a less confrontational manner, allowing for more fun and engaging interaction. For example, a study conducted by Broaddus et al. (2013) found a decrease in stereotyping and an increase in positive interaction between officers and youths when they shared common interests and were able to engage in a fun way. Despite the challenges in serving as a mentor, research shows that officers possess the skills to serve as a mentor.

Mentoring has been an acceptable practice for tackling the needs and problems of youths for centuries. Mentorship is a way to provide guidance and training (Schlossman, 1977), serve as a role model to fatherless children, and assist youth in need of socialization and guidance with positive

adults (Grossman & Garry, 1997). Broadly speaking, a mentor is simply a law-abiding community adult who serves as an advocate (e.g., police officers, youth workers, counselors, etc.) to keep youth from potential negative behaviors, school dropouts, delinquency, or academic failure. DuBois and Karcher (2005) provide three characteristics that a mentor should possess. First, they must be more experienced than the mentee; second, they must provide guidance to facilitate growth; third, the relationship between the two must consist of an emotional connection. As a mentor, officers can re-enforce growth in youths impacted by gun violence and assist with enhancing their livelihood. However, previous research on police as mentors argues that it is an unused source of support for mentorship programs (Arter, 2006).

Conceptualization of mentoring is still evolving. As Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) note, the emerging conceptualization of mentoring is a "collegial learning relationship instead of an expert, hierarchical one-way view" (p. 1803). Due to the abstract conceptualization of the term "mentoring," previous research has focused on different outcomes when trying to formulate the concept. For example, previous research examining the mentor-mentee relationship has focused on the mentor's perceptions of youth (Lakind et al., 2014, 2015), mentor characteristics (Cho et al., 2011; Erdem & Aytemur, 2008), mentee perceptions (Clarke, 2017), and perception of mentors and mentees (Fowler & O'Gorman, 2005). Focusing on mentor-mentee relationships, however, overlooks such topics as mentors' characteristics. Extant research has also not looked at how officers' approach to mentoring differs from each other and impacts the mentorship process. Law enforcement agencies could also use multiple strategies in the mentorship and restructure their programs accordingly. Often, these programs seek police officers' and parents' involvement to better the program outcomes.

Historically, volunteers and individuals with social work backgrounds served as a support system for mentoring programs (Arter, 2006). However, given the shortage of volunteers and adult role models, officers can step in and serve in a non-uniform capacity to support children through one-to-one mentoring, group mentoring, or e-mentoring (Arter, 2006; Rhodes et al., 2002). Previous research also argues that finding interested adults to give back to their community has become a challenge due to lack of interest, scarce resources, and social networks within the community (Sundeen et al., 2007). By allowing officers to serve as mentors in police-led organizations, youths in need of a role model will be provided with one, officers will have the opportunity to experience the real lives of citizens living in marginalized communities, and officers will gain additional insight into the issues that youths impacted by gun violence face on a day-to-day basis. Through the mentorship program, officers will also interact with citizens from different age groups, cultural backgrounds, and neighborhoods, which can have negative or positive results.

Police-led organizations require officers to maintain a strong relationship with marginalized youths, their families, and the community at large. Through the mentorship program, officers can learn to communicate with citizens in marginalized communities using familiar language or street jargon (Arter, 2006). However, it is not uncommon for citizens in minority neighborhoods to use their previous experiences and prejudices to form negative perceptions toward the police (Benton, 2020; Brown & Benedict, 2002; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2010; Tyler, 2004). Previous research also shows that poor police-community relationship is still an issue in minority neighborhoods (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009; Carr et al., 2007; Weitzer et al., 2008; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Given those tensions, law enforcement agencies have adopted different program initiatives such as the Police Athletic League, Cops Mentoring Kids, and Police Explorers program (Anderson et al., 2007; Bustad & Andrews, 2017; Sanchez, 2017) to improve their relationships with youths and the community. Schools have also adopted different strategies, such as allowing officers to run Police Athletic League teams, teaching DARE and conflict resolution classes, and serving as a counselor to students in order to involve officers in mentorship (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018; Travis III & Coon, 2005). Officers who participate in mentorship programs can also expect an increase in trust from participants. Specifically, Anderson et al. (2007) reported that more than 90% of youths who participated in a youth program that involved the police felt safe, accepted, and part of a community.

In contrast to well-known police-youth programs, such as the Police Athletic League, DARE, and Police Explorers, police-led organizations that target youth impacted by gun violence are crucial to strengthening the relationship between these groups and the community. A qualitative study conducted by Spencer (2007) found that youth programs that ended prematurely had a lot to do with what mentors expected, compared to what they experienced. Equally, mentors' attitudes toward their mentee(s) influenced how they approach the mentorship process, affecting the program outcomes. Police-led organizations target different groups of youths, many of whom face challenges posed by their external environments (e.g., homes, schools, and communities). Scholars argue that failed relationships tend to leave mentors feeling overwhelmed due to tough life challenges for both mentees and their families (Spencer, 2007). Fear of mentee neighborhoods, support from family members, and balancing relationships with mentees and family members are also salient stressors (Herrera et al., 2012). Police-led organizations require both parental and community support. Involving parents, school administrators, and local leaders can provide valuable insight into the program's overall outcomes (Keller, 2005; Spencer et al., 2011).

The present study aims to build on the above mentorship literature to examine the characteristics of the police mentors

that lend themselves to successful interventions for at-risk youth. The main question is: how do police officers' approach to mentorship influence the success of police-led organizations? Unlike extant literature that has examined the micro-level mentor-mentee relationships, this study aims to analyze the police mentors' approaches that lend themselves to the programmatic success. In other words, the focus is on gaining insights for the macro-level programmatic success based on micro-level nuances of the police officers' approach to mentorship. I draw on SCT to examine these nuanced approaches of the police officers as mentors of at-risk youth in building positive behavior leading to successful programmatic outcomes.

Social Capital Theory

The notion of SCT has been conceptualized and operationalized in various ways (Andrews, 2012; Bourdieu, 1990, 2011; Coleman, 1987, 1994; Portes, 1998). Broadly, SCT explains how trust is embedded in social networks and norms; it provides insights into the mentor-mentee relationship for successful police-led organizations (Putnam, 2000). Scholars, such as Bourdieu (1990) and Coleman (1988), provide different perspectives on the theory. For example, when speaking of the SCT, Bourdieu focuses on relationships and how those relationships can influence systems of power and privileges. On the other hand, Coleman considers the impact that social networks can have on an individual educational outcome, school retention, and other life outcomes (Miller, 2012; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). Lin (2002) also provides additional insight on the SCT, arguing that it is simply an investment in social relationships with expected returns. For this research, social capital will be viewed as an intangible form of capital, where individuals are provided with access to privileged channels of information and resources through their social network. As suggested by Portes (1998) and Stanton-Salazar (1997), social capital cannot be acquired through material resources, such as economic and human capital, and it is only through social network.

Several studies have used the term "social capital" to explain academic achievement (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Hagan et al., 2003; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016), positive development and behavioral outcomes (Runyan et al., 1998), and social adjustment (Dufur et al., 2008). The SCT has also been widely used to examine community-building programs, the performance of public services, and education-related programs (Andrews & Brewer, 2013; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Goddard, 2003; Leana & Pil, 2006; Miller, 2009). Therefore, enhancing our understanding of how social capital (i.e., social network) operates is beneficial, as it can highlight how cultural capital (i.e., embodied disposition) is transmitted within mentor and mentee (i.e., officers and youths impacted by gun violence) networks.

According to Coleman (1988), social capital consists of various entities (i.e., norms, sanctions, closure, and information

channels) that have two commonly known characteristics: they are all socially constructed, and they facilitate some behaviors of those involved within the structure. Upholding the social structure that characterizes the relationship between the institution (i.e., police-led youth organization) and the relationship between mentor and mentee is essential to achieving institutional and personal goals (e.g., enhancing the social skills and academic performance of youth). Additionally, officers can have a stronger impact on the lives of youth impacted by gun violence through the creation of norms, sanctions, closure, and information channels. Police officers (i.e., mentors) can also network with youths in marginalized communities; through those network relationships, they can gain information about the communities in which the youth reside and prevent them from dropping out of school or failing academically. Previous research supports those claims, arguing that social capital is critical in enhancing academic performance and preventing school dropouts (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Goddard, 2003).

The social capital provides valuable insights for understanding how officers' approaches to mentoring impact police-led organizations' outcomes. First, social capital is created when officers and youths involved in police-led organizations establish norms through regular meetings. Officers hoping to establish those norms must accept that mutual trust and shared expectations are crucial. Second, reinforcing social capital requires sanctions when these norms are violated. For example, students who fail to complete their school assignments are temporarily banned from playing basketball or football. Third, social capital is sustained when there are close ties among the individuals in the social network (Coleman, 1988, 1994). Last, officers should form connections with other mentors (i.e., officers), program leaders, community leaders, and elected officials to ensure that youths impacted by gun violence have access to the resources and knowledge (i.e., information channels) available through police-led organizations.

Engaging in police-led organizations also provides officers with access to public libraries, leaders and administrators of partnering agencies (e.g., BBBS), public school counselors, and elected officials. As such, they can use those social networks to ensure that mentees maximize their access to the resources available through the police-led organization. The functions of information channels described by Coleman (1988, 1994) and Smith (2007) provide insight into how social capital is created. Scholars argue that the primary function of information channels is to create and maintain social capital (Coleman, 1994; Smith, 2007). For example, officers and youths who are impacted by gun violence (i.e., mentor-mentee) join police-led organizations to provide or acquire academic, behavioral, and social information. Furthermore, information channel enriches the reproduction of social capital by "regulating the quantity and quality of knowledge, skill sets, and resources that are transmitted between mentors and mentees" (Smith, 2007, p. 38).

For example, if officers perceived that the police-led organization had a significant impact on the academic, behavioral, and social skills of youths, the likelihood of having a positive mentoring experience increases. This research draws on Coleman's (1988) four components of social capital to understand how police officers approach their mentorship toward youth in the program.

Empirical Context

This research is empirically based on an in-depth case study of a police-led organization in a major urban area in the southeast. The program started in 2016 and is administratively divided into three regions—northside, intracoastal, and south districts—within the county for implementation. It uses the best practices strategically geared toward community-oriented policing with a focus on youth crime prevention. The program seeks to support four key components: nutrition, mental wellness, education, and employment opportunity. It uses community-based programs and evidence-based curricula from key community stakeholders to mentor youth from entering into potential violence and criminal behavior. The program is housed within the police department, managed directly by the police department, and funded through external grants and donations to provide such targeted mentorship to youth impacted by gun violence. The program also provides a nurturing environment for the youths to play and learn while also empowering them to succeed.

The police-led organization is administered by a professional staff of law enforcement officers, guided by a departmental operating standard. The program director, managers, and board members oversee the program development. While all board members are not employees of the law enforcement agency, the program director, managers, and mentors are full-time employees of the agency. Officers are recruited internally by the Community Affairs Bureau. Officers interested in becoming a mentor must apply and wait for an interview. After the interview, officers must go through a screening process to protect the youth, screening out applicants who are unlikely to form a genuine relationship with the youth or commit to their role as a mentor. Furthermore, they must go through an orientation and training process, in which they are provided with the necessary tools, resources, and information needed for their position.

Police-led organizations are distinctive from general mentoring programs like the BBBS: they have a distinctive connection with the local police. The police youth organizations typically have a community safety priority—the aim is to prevent youth impacted by gun violence from entering into behaviors that are antithetical to the community's safety. The involvement of the police changes the mentoring dynamics: the police are not only the big brother or big sister in the familial sense but also the big brother in the law enforcement sense of having the power to penalize the youth. Police-led

organizations thus have an interesting role, navigating a thin line between the power of the police force to incarcerate and the welfare of at-risk youth who could be potentially prone toward a punishable behavior. They offer a modern and progressive approach to mentoring by an arm of the local government that is oriented to enforcing the law. Yet, very little research to date has focused on how police-led organizations function.

Mentors (i.e., officers) selected for the role work in groups to mentor the kids, follow up with their teachers to make sure their grades and attendance are on track, visit their households to identify other services they need, and then work with government and community organizations to connect the children and their families with these services. The program addresses areas outside of the typical crime-fighting environment of incarceration. It attempts to engage children before they go into the state juvenile or adult criminal justice systems.

Through educational, social, and recreational activities, officers seek to maintain a healthy relationship with youths while also helping them improve their academic, behavior, and social skills. The program provides each officer with a cell phone to maintain regular contact with the parent and the youth during normal and after normal business hours. The officers, however, must maintain a balance between consistency and not being overbearing and discuss the calendar of events with both the youth and the parent(s). Weekly contact with the parent, teachers, and counselors to check on participating youths' grades, attendance, and behavior is also required. Given that mentorship is part of the officer's normal work hours, participating youth can contact the officers at any given time during the day.

The program proactively engages adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17, who have a sibling or close family member who has been a direct victim of gun violence within the north, south, or intracoastal district. Participants are predominantly African-American and low-income youths. While the police-led organization was started in 2016, it was not until 2021, after the COVID-19 pandemic hiatus, that the program re-opened its doors to a small group of boys and girls exposed to gun violence who exhibited problematic behavior in their community. The program serves over 30 full-time students in the unincorporated areas of the county. Through partnerships with several agencies and local groups (e.g., Park, Recreation, and Open Spaces, Public Library System, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and The Children's Trust), the program offers numerous social, educational, and professional development programs and activities. Currently, the program activities include but are not limited to homework assistance, field trips, employment, and professional skill-building programs.

The selection of the police-led organization in a major urban area in the southeast for the in-depth case study is justifiable. The county in which the program operates provides a good broader context for the case study. It is the seventh most

populous U.S. county, and since 2007, there has been a sharp increase in population, which has disproportionately affected low-income individuals (Beck-Sague et al., 2017). According to the U.S. Census (2019), 20.2% of individuals living in the county are under the age of 18 years, 16.0% of the population in the city is living in poverty, 53.3% of the population is foreign-born, 69.1% are identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 17.9% are Black or African American. Although the county has many pockets of at-risk youth population, the juvenile referral rate has been falling for several years (Walters, 2008). The rate was 75.1 in 2019, well below the state's rate of 160 per 10,000 population.

Programs like the police-led organization have arguably contributed to the successful downturn of juvenile delinquents (Miner-Romanoff, 2023). Still, many youths are exposed to guns and other types of violence in the county, which can lead to symptoms of depression and criminal behavior (Bancalari et al., 2022; Quimby et al., 2018), post-traumatic stress disorder (Kennedy & Ceballo, 2014), and difficulties in school (Bergen-Cico et al., 2018). The gun violence incidents in certain communities surpass other areas enormously: the program itself was started as a means to stem the increasing number of children who died from gun violence in 2016–2017. Lessons from the police-led organization are thus useful to learn from for other successful programs.

Method

Qualitative research on youth mentoring programs pairing older adults with at-risk youth is not new; it goes as far back as the 1900s (Bustad & Andrews, 2017). Viewed as a preventive method for "at-risk" youth, qualitative methods have been a prominent approach to studying mentorship programs (De Anda, 2001). For example, in assessing police and citizens' perception of each other, Harty et al. (2020) posit that adopting a phenomenological approach was necessary "to gain in-depth and information-rich stories from police, youth, and parents" (p. 17). The qualitative approach in this study is aimed to provide a holistic set of insights from the program leaders as well as the police mentors in the front line (Brunson, 2007; Brunson & Miller, 2006b; Carr et al., 2007; Ellison, 2001; Sharp & Atherton, 2007; Weitzer, 1999).

Qualitative research examining police-youth relationships typically use different types of inductive methods. Several scholars use interviews (Brunson & Miller, 2006a, 2006b; Sharp & Atherton, 2007), focus groups (Dirikx et al., 2012), or a combination of multiple methods as their primary source of qualitative data retrieval when studying police youth relationships (Broadus et al., 2013; Caldas et al., 2018; Clayman & Skinns, 2012; Harty et al., 2020). As argued by Marshall and Rossman (2014), using multiple qualitative methods enhances research credibility and confirmability. Therefore, for this research, in-depth virtual interviews and analysis of secondary data sources were used (See Appendix A and B). Appendix A and Appendix B are

supplemental material available online. The supplemental materials provide an overview of the questions asked of the program leaders and mentors. The researcher verified each piece of information from multiple sources.

The researcher embedded herself with the police-led organization in order to conduct the in-depth case study. The researcher established rapport with the program leaders and police mentors in early 2019 to conduct a preliminary study of the program. In parallel, the program leaders and the public university collaborated on a Memorandum of Understanding to evaluate the program. The researcher participated in ride-alongs with the officers (i.e., mentors), attended their staff meetings, and interviewed several officers. The researcher followed up with over 5 months of participant observations of the organization's board meetings, community events, and other informal events. The Memorandum of Understanding, however, took over a year to materialize due to leadership changes. From 2019 to 2022, the researcher was involved in close observation of the police-led organization activities. Secondary data was reviewed and analyzed (N = 19), such as policy documents and annual reports around the police-led organizations. The researcher also participated in community events and board meetings to gain an in-depth understanding of how the program functions.

To gauge the relationship between the mentorship and program outcomes, this study consisted of 25 interviews with key informants associated with the program. The interviews were conducted by the present researcher. The interview participants included program leaders (N = 5) and mentors (N = 20). The researcher collected the data between July 2021 and October 2021 through virtual semi-structured interviews (face-to-face interviews were not possible due to COVID). All the program leaders and mentors participated in the study. Extant research holds that law enforcement officers are generally hard to reach because they are unlikely to trust outsiders (i.e., non-police) (Paoline, 2003). However, a strong rapport with the agency provided access to insightful conversations about their approach to mentorship (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). The overarching data collection strategy is a single exploratory case study of a police-led organization. To achieve the goal of the paper, the author relied on official policy documents and officers' accounts of their experiences.

For this paper, the interview questions were focused on the general philosophy of the officers' approach to mentoring youths and the program structure. The virtual semi-structured interviews were open-ended and conducted via Zoom, a web conferencing platform utilized for audio and/or video conferencing. The interviews began with general prompts about the interviewees' backgrounds and experiences since joining the program. Following this, the interviewees were prompted to speak about their specific experiences with mentorship. The principal goal of these virtual interviews was to gain insight into program outcomes from the perspective of program leaders and mentors. I looked for specific themes

toward this end: the various types of activities that the officers undertook, the officer's motivation for becoming a mentor, their outlook toward the mentees, and so on.

Data Analysis

The approach used in this study is the inductive qualitative method, allowing the themes to emerge from the collected data (Charmaz, 2014; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; McNabb, 2014; Nowell & Albrecht, 2019). I used Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) six-phase thematic content analysis procedure to analyze the data. Specifically, previous research shows that the thematic analysis can systematically help generate codes and themes needed to report analytic observation, identify, and interpret important features from qualitative data (Clarke et al., 2015; Floersch et al., 2010).

All the recorded interviews were transcribed. The virtual semi-structured interview transcripts served as the primary data source. Before starting the virtual interviews, all participants were assured confidentiality. Next, I proceeded to ask the respondents the open-ended questions about their background and approach to mentoring the youths. After the interview, each respondent was asked to complete a questionnaire that included questions about their demographic background (e.g., race, gender, education, age, tenure, and rank).

All the recorded virtual interview transcriptions were reviewed, proofread, and edited against the audio or video files and revised for accuracy. The reviewer read the entire text of each interview conducted on the same day I collected the data. The following day, the researcher read the entire text of the transcripts again for accuracy and then uploaded the text to NVivo 12 for the content analysis. NVivo allows for data collection, data organization, data visualization, theory building, and data analysis, which helps with the understanding of research problems (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Denardo, 2002). NVivo also provides researchers with the ability to cross-examine information while dealing with massive data from interview transcripts, videos, field notes, audio, and published documents (Welsh, 2002; Wong, 2008). This software helped provide the researcher with the flexibility to manage large amounts of data, which helped improve the quality of generated results (Alam, 2021; Gibbs, 2002).

While reviewing the interview transcripts for accuracy, special attention was paid to the patterns which emerged during the readings of the transcripts. The patterns helped in creating predetermined themes before the initial coding process. Examples of the predetermined themes include participant characteristics, recruitment, motivation, activities, partnership, and structure. Following the predetermined themes created in NVivo, the researcher began to code the interview text one question at a time. For example, the researcher read all the questions asked of the first interviewee, and for each question asked, the researcher coded the themes that emerged from that question. The researcher repeated the same process for each question asked of the

program leaders and officers who participated in the interview. Utilizing NVivo for the content analysis was helpful to understand how codes and themes related to officers' approach to mentoring youths impacted by gun violence were related. The use of NVivo ensured that the assessment of the data was completed in a systematic and comprehensive manner.

To obtain an in-depth reliable insight into the police-led organization, the researcher used data triangulation (Yin, 2009). The researcher conducted an extensive document analysis, including annual reports, newspaper articles, and relevant policy documents. The researcher participated in and observed several of their youth program events, board meetings, and partnership events. Furthermore, 25 virtual semi-structured interviews with individual program leaders and mentors were held. To check the validity of the research findings, the preliminary results were presented to the program leaders and mentors who participated in the research study. The virtual semi-structured interviews, as well as the review of the secondary data analysis, focused on how mentoring practices influence the program outcomes.

The dependability of the research study was strengthened through embedded case study design as well as following strict protocols in the data collection process (Yin, 2009). The research design selected for this study also provided room to describe changes that occurred in the research context and how they impacted the approach taken for the study. The author maintained a rigorous audit trail to ensure confirmability. For example, the audit trail consisted of safe storage of the research protocols, recordings, observation notes, as well as text analysis files.

Descriptive Statistics About the Sample

Table 1 describes the program leaders' and mentors' race, gender, education, and age. Most interviewees were identified as Blacks, but there was a wide range of diversity as it pertains to program leaders' and mentors' education and age (see Table 1). There were a total of 25 law enforcement officers who participated in the virtual interviews, 14 females and 11 males. Six of the participants did not provide details about their characteristics other than male or female. Out of all respondents, 52.63% were Black, 31.58% were Hispanic, 10.53% were White, and 5.26% was classified as other. Most of the participants were ages 31 to 40. Out of the participating respondents, 36.84% were 31 to 35 years of age, and 21.05% were 36 to 40. Combined, approximately 58% of the program leaders and mentors were ages 31 to 40.

As shown in Table 2, among the program leaders and mentors, 68.42% of respondents had less than a year of experience working with the police-led organization, 26.32% of respondents had 1 to 2 years, and 5.26% respondent had 3 to 5 years of experience working with the police-led organization. Regarding the ranking of participants, 63.16% of interviewees were front-line police officers; 21.05% were in mid- to upper-level management, such as sergeant,

Table 1. Interviewee Characteristic.

	Program leaders and mentors	Percentage
Race		
Black	10	52.63%
White	2	10.53%
Hispanic/Latino	6	31.58%
Other	1	5.26%
Total	19	100%
Gender		
Female	14	56%
Male	11	44%
Total	25	100%
Education/degree		
Less than high school	0	0.00%
High school graduate	4	21.05%
Some college	3	15.79%
College graduate	8	42.11%
Professional degree	4	21.05%
Doctorate	0	0.00%
Total	19	100%
Age in years		
18–25	0	0.00%
26–30	2	10.53%
31–35	7	36.84%
36–40	4	21.05%
41–45	1	5.26%
46–50	2	10.53%
51–55	1	5.26%
56–60	2	10.53%
61+	0	0.00%
Total	19	100%

Note. Six participants did not provide demographic characteristics about their race, education, or age but who identified as male or female.

Table 2. Interviewee Tenure and Rank.

	Program leaders and mentors	Percentage
Years of service in the police-led organization		
Less than a year	13	68.42%
1 to 2 years	5	26.32%
3 to 5 years	1	5.26%
Total	19	100%
Rank: police department		
Front-line police (e.g., patrol officers)	12	63.16%
Police manager (e.g., sergeant, lieutenant, captain, deputy chief, and chief)	4	21.05%
Other	3	15.79%
Total	19	100%

Note. Six participants did not provide any information about years of service and rank.

lieutenant, captain, deputy chief, or chief; and 15.79% served in different positions.

Most officers identified themselves as front-line officers, followed by police managers (e.g., sergeant, lieutenant, captain, deputy chief, and chief), and others. Before starting the virtual interviews, all participants were assured confidentiality. Therefore, all uniquely identifiable data, such as names of participants, districts, and their titles, were changed to ensure confidentiality. Several participants were easily identified based on their professional backgrounds. As a result, the personal characteristics of some individuals were changed to ensure confidentiality.

Findings

This present study extends prior research on community-police engagement and the administration of public programs by highlighting the viewpoint of program leaders, police, participant observation, and secondary data sources. This approach provides an in-depth understanding of how officers' approach to mentorship can impact program outcomes. A word cloud of the virtual semi-structured interviews with the five program leaders and 20 officers provided a visualization of the words that appeared most frequently throughout the text (Ramsden & Bate, 2008). The word cloud in NVivo revealed that the most frequent words included "school," "grade," "brothers," "homework," "officers," "little," "sister," "football," "people," and "house." These words provided a visual perspective of the content from the virtual semi-structured interviews.

The remaining findings of this study are presented in three sections. The first section focuses on the program leaders' views about the characteristics of police officers as mentors. The second section highlights how officers' previous experiences motivate them to be mentors. The third section explains how officers stimulate students by taking them out of their usual environments. An identification code was provided for each quote used by an interviewee (M= male, F= female, MT=mentor; PL=program leader). For example, FPL-4 means that this was the fourth participant in the interview, who identified as a program leader.

Program Leaders' Hiring Perspective: Mentors Need Empathy for At-Risk Youth

Program leaders who participate in the interviews expressed a distinctive view from that of other participants in the interviews. They repeatedly emphasized that the selection of police mentors is very important for mentorship to be successful. The police mentors need to be caring and empathetic toward at-risk youth impacted by gun violence. Therefore, before officers are assigned to the Community Affairs Bureau as a mentor, they must complete an application form and undergo an interview "with the two supervisors

and an officer" (MPL-2). FPL-4 describes the interview process as rigorous and thorough because officers selected for the position are "going to be dealing with kids who are directly impacted by gun violence." Following the interview process, officers are ranked on a scale based on their responses to determine if they qualify and can deal with minority youth from marginalized communities (FPL-1 FPL-3, FPL-4). The interview process also takes into account the officer's background with respect to their involvement in the community and the agency (FPL-1).

The program leaders look for several characteristics when selecting officers to serve as a mentor to the youths impacted by gun violence. For example, FPL-4 stated, "we want officers that the youth can relate to... that they can identify with... our work here is about making bonds and making a connection." As such, they look for officers with a background in neighborhood resources, community-oriented assignments, teaching, coaching, and working with kids (FPL-5). FPL-5 added that this is an "extensive Monday through Friday" position. Officers will not only have to do their police work, but their "called to duty is like a teacher, social worker, educator, counselor, and motivator" (FPL-5). MPL-2 also emphasized how they are drawn to the experiences and ideas of officers, especially if they are innovative enough to meet program outcomes.

Officers attracted to the youth program possess a strong background in working with youths and the community. However, the program leaders stated that the officers selected must also have a passion and drive for the work that they do, because working with marginalized groups can be difficult when attempting to gain the trust of the kids and their families (FPL-4, FPL-5). As it is also depicted in current literature, distrust, poor perception of officers, and poor police-community relations are common in minority neighborhoods (Benton, 2020; Leiber et al., 1998; Weitzer & Tuch, 1999), which can make working with youths exposed to gun violence difficult. One of the program leaders explained that participating youth and their families may "... not be receptive to the assistance... or receptive to being in collaboration with law enforcement" (FPL-4). As a result, officers brought into the unit but later deemed unfit to serve will be removed from the program (FPL-4). Mentoring youth is a demanding task, but ... "officers that were in it for the realness of it were that they heart are in it to help and assist kids" [sic] are capable of being that reinforcement that youths impacted by gun violence need (FPL-4, FPL-5).

Police Mentors' Perspective: Motivation From Prior Experience

Why do police mentors self-select to be a mentor? Understanding this motivation of the police mentors provides insights into their characteristics that are collectively important for programmatic success. A small group of officers

mentioned that their prior work experience in dealing with children prompted them to become a mentor. They worked with kids or that they simply have a passion for helping children. Several officers mentioned that they served in leadership roles, such as coaching or refereeing youth sports, military, teaching at public schools, tutoring students while in college, juvenile corrections, public service, park coordination, as well as being first responders on the scene when someone needs help. Thus, officers' motivation for mentoring students impacted by gun violence is influenced by their previous experiences. For example, MMT-20 stated that what helps him as a mentor is his ability to lead by example and make people laugh and his coaching and referee experiences from the age of 17.

Although only a small number of officers stated previous experience teaching and tutoring middle and high school students, others were able to use the skills learned from college or past job experiences to help the students. For example, FMT-9 stated that in her previous role, she "used to go out and teach summer programs with the kids, teach them stranger danger, take safety issues and any events that occurred on the park." FMT-8 said, "In between state correction, I also did substitute teacher for sixth graders, earth science"; FMT-18, on the other hand, discussed that in her previous role as a tutor in college, "we would go from middle schools to elementary to high school, and I will see what the kids were lacking." MMT-4 explained how his 8 years of teaching experience facilitates listening, connecting with parents, and offering advice to students. In fact, MMT-4 reinforced hard work ethic and a feeling of confidence, with the ability to "build that foundation that was initially unattainable."

The relationship between officers and youth impacted by gun violence is defined by care, love, and ability to connect with the youth. The officers' general notion was that mentorship is "letting kids know that someone cares about them, that there's somebody that care about the decision that they make, the thinks that they do... Constantly giving them, giving kids something to look forward to" (MMT-20). In addition to the idea that mentorship is love and that "love gives you confidence," officers also believed that mentorship is "like a second parent to these kids," a father, "a big brother, uncle, a role model to these kids because they don't have that, they lacked that" (MMT-20, FMT-8, MMT-22). Most officers believed that mentors should be able to relate to the at-risk students. MMT-10 said:

As an overall group, we have a good mixture of personnel, we have different backgrounds, we have Black, White, Hispanics, we have different people with different experiences in life. So that helps out a lot. So, everybody is able to relate to one of the kids, just because let's say some of the kids might not relate to me, but they might relate to somebody else, due to their either their background, or maybe they've gone through similar circumstances.

All the officers demonstrated a passion for public service and seeing a change in the lives of the students. The officers spoke about the similarities of their previous roles and how they were able to transfer their passion for helping children to their new position as a mentor. FMT-8 stated that as a first responder, she was always the first one on the scene of an emergency and enjoyed helping people: "I would always want to try to help people, especially with kids, I just, I have a special place in my heart for kids." Likewise, another officer explained how as a correctional officer it was disheartening seeing the kids on jail tours, showing them what could happen if they don't change their behaviors, but after the tour, he would never see them again (MMT-7). Mentorship, as MMT-7 describes, provides him with an opportunity to keep the kids out of the juvenile justice system.

Police Mentor's Perspective: Stimulate Students' Mindset

The police mentors' philosophy is significant for how they relate with a mentee and how they encourage the mentees toward a path of success. The general theme that evolved from the interviews is that the police mentors emphasized stimulating students' mindset to be oriented toward a successful path. Stimulating the mindset helps in encouraging mentees to have better academic achievements and have better social and behavioral skills. Several mentors spoke about taking the students to field trips to "stimulate... their minds" because many have never "been outside of their neighborhoods" (FMT-11, FMT-12, FMT-16). Disadvantaged neighborhoods negatively influence youths' growth (Kennedy & Ceballos, 2014). For example, instead of discouraging or belittling the at-risk students struggling academically, they encourage them by saying "Listen you know, we can turn a D into a C and a C into a B, but it takes work and dedication" (FPL-4). The officers understand that at-risk students often lack the parental support at home or that they simply are not motivated, so they try to change the at-risk students' attitudes about the situation or "be a conduit to them being successful or breaking barriers" (FPL-3).

Several of the officers go out of their way to develop a strong relationship with the students. Specifically, this involved spending additional time with the mentees over the weekend even if the mentor is off and/or finding ways to connect with the parents or legal guardian. MMT-5 said, "So I had one Saturday that I was out, I was off, I'm out." However, he managed to spend a weekend with the kids as promised. "Yeah, it made they whole week [and] that's all they talk about now." The officer joked about having to rush because he forgot about his arrangement with the at-risk students, but he managed to keep his promise to the kids, which he described as a little day that they will never forget.

The children and adolescents in the program receive daily assistance with their academic, behavioral, and social skills, exposing them to opportunities beyond their day-to-day environments. Extant research has well documented how youths living in marginalized neighborhoods are more likely to be exposed to community violence, which is linked to low academic achievement and school problems (Henrich et al., 2004; McGill et al., 2014; Stein et al., 2003). The officers were creative in finding ways to help the students gain exposure and understand that their current situations do not have to determine their future.

The officer involved in the program provides academic support to the students by assisting them with their homework and school projects. However, the mentors found helping students with homework assignments challenging. On the one hand, officers with teaching and tutoring backgrounds could easily navigate through student assignments, but other officers without such background experiences found it a bit challenging. FMT-16 explained the challenge of helping students; her ability to assist the student may not be what the teachers expect, so having tutors that “know the new curriculum” may keep the students on track. FPL-5 added that having tutors, such as individuals from the county public school system that can deeply engage the students throughout the tutoring session, may also be more impactful. Specifically, the tutors from the public school system “understand what it is that they’re learning... [and] can actually make an impact on them academically.” MMT-2 also discussed attempts to find additional tutors to break down assignments to the students based on their challenges. He said the officers reached out to universities and high schools that can provide students to serve as volunteer tutors. MMT-2 explained that those attempts were made because they don’t want to leave any kids behind and that school is essential.

The various educational activities, such as homework and project assistance, etiquette and cooking classes, college tours, and guest speakers, who are invited to talk about financial literacy, were also important. FMT-6 stated that etiquette classes, financial literacy sessions, and other activities are several ways that officers seek to broaden students’ horizons, so they don’t have to stay in a “certain bubble.” Several officers also spoke about students not wanting to talk about their grades. FMT-9 explained that one of her students would give a nonchalant response when asked about her grades. FMT-9 stated, “She didn’t want to talk about it, she’s like I get F’s.” FMT-9 also went on to explain that her F students are often the type of students that do not want to raise their hand in class or ask teachers questions. FMT-9 described the situation as sad and unfortunate, but the fact that they have tutors in the program with teaching and tutoring background means that her mentee has someone she can go to for help.

Social activities, such as weekend outings to dinner, football and basketball games, movie nights, and round-table discussions, are also mentoring approaches used to enhance

police-youth relationships. The social activities also create a space to build stronger bonds and trust with the students. MMT-14 described most of the students as quiet, but once officers build “that bond and the trust, then students can begin to open up.” Meyer and Bouchev (2010) argue that frequency of contact and emotional closeness are crucial to building strong bonds and trust. MMT-14 further explained that after building those relationships with the students, the officer will know how to effectively meet the needs of the mentees because the students are facing other challenges that they do not talk about. FMT-18 added that “Every child is different... some needs help in their social skills because there more so introverts.”

Several mentors also mentioned that most of the students aspire to become professional athletes but have never attended an in-person game. To stimulate their curiosity, officers take them to football and basketball games at the stadium and different universities. Some children are interested in music and art, so they are provided with opportunities to create their own beats at the library, which “has a Youmedia program” or art festivals at outdoor museums (FPL-1, FMT-16). Students in the program are also exposed to different cultures, such as Hispanic and Haitian cultures, or simply taken out to a “nice Friday outing” to the movies or museum, so they can enjoy themselves (FMT-11, FMT-12, FMT-13).

Discussion

The findings of this paper support the SCT as a strategy for affecting mentorship successfully. In particular, it adds to the literature on social capital of youth organizations (Jarrett et al., 2005; Kahne & Bailey, 1999) and public organizations (Andrews & Boyne, 2010; Compton & Meier, 2016; Holme & Rangel, 2012). Empirically, some of the findings of the police-led organization are similar to previous research (Anderson et al., 2007; Miner-Romanoff, 2023). However, this study provides a fresh theoretical perspective in exploring the link between social capital and officers’ approach to mentoring youth impacted by gun violence. For program leaders of police-led organizations to effectively study the impact of police mentorship on youths’ academic, behavioral, and social skills, they must first understand how social capital is produced within the mentor and mentee relationship process.

This study highlights how officers (i.e., mentors) and youths produce and maintain social capital through their engagement in the police-led organization. Specifically, the virtual semi-structured interviews and participant observations suggest that officers establish norms by building trust with the youths, their community, and their family members. As suggested by Coleman (1988, 1994), trust is one of the key components for creating social capital. While the officers understand the importance of friendship with the youths, they also expect the youths to behave

accordingly and follow the program rules. Although not heavily implemented, officers impart real consequences for youths who violate norms (i.e., sanctions). For example, if the youths get into trouble with the law, they may be removed from the program permanently. The program leaders of the police-led organization also encourage officers (i.e., mentors) to develop strong networks (i.e., closure) with participating youths' parents or legal guardians, guidance counselors, community leaders, and stakeholders. To this end, the researcher concludes that officers serving as mentors can acquire or provide youths with the necessary academic, behavioral, or social skill sets and resources (i.e., information channels) more effectively. This can be accomplished by being strategic in how they maintain the social capital that they accumulate through partnership, trust, and shared expectations.

The third finding reveals that police officers (i.e., mentors) are a resource that can help enhance youths exposed to gun violence in their community. However, stimulating students' mindset and enhancing their social capital cannot be done in isolation. Rather, officers' ability to broaden students' horizons is largely shaped by partnering with local and public agencies, as well as inviting individuals from the community to serve as guest speakers. The research findings from the interviews imply the importance of the officers in enhancing youths' social capital that translates to better academic, behavioral, and social outcomes. This suggests that police-led organizations seeking to improve their program outcomes should focus specifically on creating partnerships and working closely with policymakers to ensure police mentors have the resources to meet participating youth's academic, behavioral, and social needs.

Officers believe police-led organizations are a context where youths can gain real-life experiences, social skills, and a sense of belonging. This is supported by Anderson et al.'s (2007) study, which showed that involvement in police youth programs can provide participants with a sense of belonging. According to the interviewees, officers have helped the youths enhance their social skills by teaching them the importance of making eye contact and engaging with their peers. Several officers described the youths as shy, introverted, and scared, but after several attendances, they opened up and began to socialize. Being part of the police-led organization and serving in a non-uniform capacity might also, by itself, allow the officers to enhance the legitimacy of their agencies, gain respect, and build trust with individuals in marginalized communities (Arter, 2006). Similarly, through the informal contact that officers maintain with the participating youths, their families, and the community, officers can gain insight on the day-to-day challenges youths face at home, schools, and neighborhoods. Involvement in the police-led organizations may also provide opportunities for officers to attain social capital within the communities they serve, keep youths off the street, and reduce delinquent behaviors among youths.

Research on this topic requires a more in-depth analysis of police-led organizations. Specifically, there is a need for more extensive research to determine whether the race of the officers and the mentees affects the mentor-mentee relationship or whether the cultural similarities influence the outcome of their relationships. Further research may also investigate the benefits of becoming a police mentor, how or if the families of the youth changed their perception of the officers during or after the mentorship experiences, and whether there is a difference in outcome between youths who want to succeed and those who do not. A comparative case study can also highlight the value of police-led organizations to an urban city. Overall, this study has sharpened our understanding of the value that police-led organizations have on youths impacted by gun violence. At the micro-level, this study represents the beginning of more research to come in understanding officers' approach to mentoring youths. Similarly, we can begin to bridge the gap between criminal justice and public administration literature by synthesizing knowledge across disciplines.

This research study is not without limitations. The case used for this research may or may not be representative of all police-led organizations targeting youths exposed to gun violence in the state or for all similar youth programs in other states. However, by directly involving all the officers and program leaders in the research, this study enhances past research while contributing to the scholarship on public management. Furthermore, the researcher analyzed the data without an inter-coder, which may raise the concern of reliability and bias in interpreting the research findings.

Conclusion

This article is an exploratory case study of a police-led organization in a major urban area in the southeast. It examines officers' approach to mentoring youths impacted by gun violence. To gain an in-depth understanding of how officers' approach to mentorship influences the success of police-led organizations, the researcher conducted 25 virtual semi-structured interviews with key informants, five program leaders, and 20 mentors (i.e., police officers). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) six-phase thematic content analysis procedure, the research shows that program leaders are highly selective of officers serving as mentors.

Findings also revealed that selected officers' previous experiences motivate them to be mentors. For example, many officers used their background experiences in teaching, coaching, or tutoring to provide mentorship to the youth. In addition, officers undertook various educational and social activities to expose the youth to experiences outside of their usual environments. For example, the officers and youth engaged in college campus tours, field trips, football games, or group dinners to broaden their horizons. Many

officers also asserted that over time they have built a strong bond with the youths, describing them as a second child, a little brother, or a little sister. Prior research findings support these claims, indicating that bonds and trust are stronger when there is a frequency of both contact and emotional closeness (Meyer & Bouchey, 2010).

Overall, the study highlights the importance of officers in facilitating positive growth in youths impacted by gun violence. According to Arter (2006), police officers can act as a conduit to prevent youths from becoming involved in the criminal justice system and serve as appropriate adult figures. Hence, police-led youth organizations, in which officers serve as mentors, can be a promising intervention to expose youths to a new form of social capital and related positive outcomes. In particular, the results suggest that managing police-led organizations requires the special selection and hiring of officers to serve as mentors for low-income community program coordination. Despite police officers not being trained to tutor in school subjects, most have previous work experiences, such as teaching, tutoring, and coaching, that apply to mentoring youths who lack a role model. Previous research on police as mentors argues that it is an unused source of support for mentorship programs (Arter, 2006).

Extant literature about social capital effects of mentor-mentee relationships at the micro-level exist, yet, little is known about how such capital is formed in police-led organizations and how this capital positively affects youths impacted by gun violence. In contrast to previous literature, this research study offers such micro-level perspective. It incorporates literature on mentor-mentee relationship and examines how law enforcement officers and youths interact, thereby adding to the public administration literature that often neglects the impact these community-based programs have on children exposed to gun violence. In an era in which public leaders, policymakers, and street-level bureaucrats struggle to protect our youths from gun violence, this article also provides a unique approach for keeping youths in the community safe.

Public administration scholars, policymakers, and local leaders can all play a role in protecting our youths from gun violence if they work together. While police mentors can provide a safe and nurturing environment for youths exposed to gun violence to learn and play, children must still return to neighborhoods where crime and violence are the norms. Police and community-based organizations servicing youths exposed to gun violence need support from the federal, state, and local agencies to achieve their program outcomes. Prioritizing these issues and conducting evidence-based research can ensure that officers have the resources needed to help with enhancing youths' development. Police youth program leaders that are conscious of the importance of quality and frequency of involvement and individual experiences will also play a more impactful role in changing the lives of our future generation. Police

mentoring comes with challenges, but it can serve as a meaningful intervention resource for youth development.


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