

Stepping Home Elements – Credible Messengers

Building off the document detailing the elements of the Stepping Home Model, the UCLA team has started researching concepts that are important for each of the elements. Below are the research findings regarding credible messengers.

Summary

Background - We define “credible messengers” as mentors who come from the same communities and have similar life experiences (e.g., former gang involvement, incarceration) with youth involved in the juvenile legal system. These shared experiences increase mentors’ credibility in the eyes of youth and allow them to build genuine trust and connection with youth who are disconnected from and have typically been “resistant” to traditional programming. There is limited empirical research examining the effects of credible messenger mentoring on youth with serious offenses. However, a few evaluations of programs working with relevant populations indicate promising results. Below are brief overviews of evaluations of three credible messenger programs in the U.S.

Search Strategy - We searched the keywords “credible messenger mentoring,” “credible messenger re-entry,” and “credible messenger juvenile” in the following databases and resources: Google Scholar; ProQuest Social Service Abstracts; National Criminal Justice Reference Service; Crime Solutions Program Profiles; Criminal Justice Abstracts; and the Credible Messenger Justice Center research library. Programs were included for consideration if they focused on youth ages 15-24, described themselves as a “credible messenger” program, and served youth either in juvenile facilities, as part of the re-entry process, or with high-risk probation status.

Results and Conclusion - Results indicate that credible messenger mentoring programs are associated with small, but statistically significant reductions in recidivism. Quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that the programs may be more impactful for other relevant aspects of re-entry, such as emotion regulation, social support, interpersonal skills, and that participants report mentor relatability (due to being a credible messenger) as a key component of their success. Ultimately, credible messenger mentoring programs seem promising in reducing recidivism among youth in juvenile facilities, but much more research is needed around their impact on youth with serious and/or violent offenses specifically.

Key Articles & Programs

PROGRAM 1 | Arches Transformative Mentoring

Overview - Arches Transformative Mentoring Program most closely matches the DJJ population. Arches serves youth ages 16-24 on probation, with high-risk of reoffending. Credible messenger mentors facilitate a 6-month program in the community, which includes individualized support, and a twice-weekly cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) journaling group. Mentors work with probation officers and counselors to connect youth to services and referrals. Mentees are compensated with stipends for progressing through the program, and provided with meals and transportation. The program is implemented by New York City's Probation Department.

Findings - There is one evaluation of Arches (Lynch et al., 2018), conducted in 2018 by the Urban Institute. The study compares the outcomes of 279 participants in Arches with a comparison group of 682 youth starting probation at the same time who did not participate in Arches. Findings demonstrate that felony re-conviction for Arches participants was 69% lower than matched peers 12 months after probation, and 57% lower at 24 months after probation. However, effects were strongest for participants under 18, and other indicators of recidivism (e.g, arrests, non-felony reconvictions) did not significantly differ from the comparison group. The report also provides quantitative and qualitative insights, which demonstrate improved participant psychosocial skills such as emotion regulation, future orientation, and relationship skills relative to the comparison group. Qualitative findings also indicated that participants felt supported by and close to their mentors, and satisfied with the program.

Best Practices - Some of the most effective components of the program were as follows: a positive family-like atmosphere, the use of credible messengers (participants described the importance of having mentors that were relatable), peer support, flexibility in program structure, and robust staff training and support.

Barriers/Limitations - Some of the main challenges for the program included: maintaining fidelity to the model and CBT curriculum across sites, mentor's varying in experience and preparation for facilitating groups, limited experience of the credible messengers, the need for greater funding to support program activities and provide youth with resources, and the need for longer than the sixmonth time period.

PROGRAM 2 | AIM

Overview - AIM serves youth ages 13-18 on probation, with high risk of reoffending. The AIM target population partially overlaps with DJJ, such as youth who are recently released from placement and are facing violation of their probation sentence that would qualify for reincarceration, or youth rearrested for committing a class 1 or 2 felony offense, although the program also serves youth with less serious incarceration histories. In AIM, youth meet with credible messenger mentors for 6-9 months, up to 30 hours per week to establish and work towards individualized goal plans in areas such as education, employment, housing, relationships, and health. Mentors work with probation officers and counselors to connect youth to services and referrals. The model was implemented and evaluated in New York City.

Findings - There is one evaluation of AIM (Cramer et al., 2018), conducted in 2018 by the Urban Institute. The study examines the outcomes of 229 AIM participants. Findings show 67% of participants were not resentenced to out of home placement because of reconvictions or adjudications at the end of the program, and when excluding technical violations, this rose to 80%. Re-arrest and re-conviction rates were also significantly lower at 6 and 12 months post program enrollment for participants who completed AIM compared to youth who did not complete the program, and a benchmark indicator of youth released from placement prior to the launch of the program. The report also provides quantitative and qualitative insights, which demonstrate that the majority of participants completing the program made progress in their re-entry goals such as improving family relationships, or educational attainment.

Best Practices - Qualitative findings indicated that both youth, families and other program stakeholders (i.e. administrators, clinical staff, etc.) felt that mentoring from a credible messenger was key to the program success, with mentors highly effective in connecting with youth or recognizing and interrupting risk behavior.

Barriers/Limitations - Qualitative findings also noted some tension and challenges with other staff concerned about the credentials of credible messenger mentors, barriers with the referral process sometimes resulting in referrals of youth who were not eligible for the program, inconsistent communication and approaches across sites and with probation or other court stakeholders, and the need for a longer program duration.

PROGRAM 3 | Peacemaker Fellowship

Overview - The Peacemaker fellowship serves individuals ages 14-34 years old identified as the highest risk for committing violence in their community (Corburn et al., 2021). The program is not explicitly focused on re-entry, nor is it court-mandated, but 84% of participants were previously incarcerated and had criminal and juvenile histories similar to those in the DJJ population, and the majority of fellows are under 24 years old. The fellowship is an 18-month curriculum with daily mentoring from credible messengers, combined with individualized goal-setting, and other social services and supports focused on healing. Fellows earn stipends for

progressing through the program, and are provided with meals, transportation, and travel opportunities. The model has been implemented in multiple cities, but was evaluated for relevant outcomes in Sacramento and Richmond CA.

Findings - The Peacemaker fellowship has the most extensive research backing of the three programs reviewed. Findings focus more on the larger effects for the community of working with highrisk individuals, but there are also some specific results related to recidivism and re-entry. In Sacramento, findings related to recidivism and crime of fellows indicated that by completion of the 18-month program, 90% of participants had no new gun charges, 44% had no new arrests, and participants had many other positive outcomes such as receiving social services, achieving individual goals, and engaging in paid work (Corburn & Fukutome-Lopez, 2020). In Richmond, CA a cost-benefit analysis of Peacemaker fellowship program found reductions in gun-related re-arrest rates and charges for participants engaged in various components of the program, as well as other benefits relevant to re-entry such as greater educational attainment, employment, earnings, and access to healthcare (Huguet et al., 2016; Wolf et al., 2015). Qualitative findings of fellows' experiences in the program also indicate that they believe that it substantially changed their world view and life trajectory to desist from crime.

Best Practices - The most effective aspects of the program include an extensive period of trust and relationship building in the community, compensation for youth as they make progress in their goals, and a longer time-frame to engage and support youth

Barriers/Limitations - There are limited opportunities in the community to connect young people to mentors. There is also turnover with partner organizations and limited capacity of staff to address all needs.

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