MENTOR

WHO MENTORED YOU?

A study examining the role mentors have played in the lives of Americans over the last half century.

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INTRODUCTION

As the youth mentoring field has expanded and diversified in America over the last 30-plus years, many adults who care about getting these valuable relationships to more young people have asked questions about the scope and scale of mentoring in American society. While young people have always found mentors in their extended kinship networks — through institutions such as schools and faith centers, and in the community among neighbors and family friends — there has long been a need to better quantify the prevalence and importance of these naturally occurring relationships. And as many varieties of mentoring programs have expanded over the last quarter century, there has been a need to further understand the reach of those programmatically provided relationships, as well as the degree to which they supplement naturally formed relationships and fill critical gaps in youths' webs of support.

In 2014, MENTOR first started to examine these societal level trends in a seminal research study that resulted in a report called *The Mentoring Effect*, a first-of-its-kind attempt to capture the prevalence of both program-provided and naturally occurring mentoring relationships for America's youth. Using a statistically representative sample of young adults from a 2013 survey, MENTOR was able to learn a great deal about how American youth were finding and experiencing mentoring relationships. By asking young adults to reflect back on the mentoring they had just experienced in their childhood and adolescence, this groundbreaking report illustrated that:

- Millions of American youth were engaged in mentoring relationships, both in and outside of structured programs. In fact, American youth were several times more likely to have mentors through natural connections than through programs that provided mentors. However, those programmatic mentors often filled critical gaps for the most vulnerable.

- Mentors provided through programs and those found through informal connections both offered meaningful support and assets to American youth — in fact, the strengths and skills of program and naturally occurring mentors complemented each other nicely, with those natural connections generally emphasizing emotional support and identity development and program-provided relationships offering a wealth of expanded opportunities and specialized skill development for young people. For the first time, our mentoring movement had insight into how mentors from different sources could together provide more holistic support to young people.

- Youth from lower-income households and those who had experienced a number of life challenges were less likely to have the support of mentors than those from more affluent and lower-risk backgrounds. While youth facing the most serious hurdles were more likely to have accessed programmatic mentors, their networks of naturally occurring mentors often lacked key components of social capital that could provide crucial educational or career supports. Essentially, we learned that meaningful mentors, like many assets in American society, were not equally distributed along socioeconomic and racial lines and that more work was needed to bolster the webs of support for youth facing serious barriers to their success.
- Lastly but perhaps most importantly, we learned that many American youth were growing up without the support of mentors at all. In fact, a staggering one in three American youth were spending their entire childhoods and adolescent years without ever experiencing the support of any mentor. And the more a child experienced poverty and other challenges in their life, the less likely they were to have had mentors — for those lowest on the socioeconomic ladder, the chances of having a mentor at all was essentially a fifty-fifty proposition.

Needless to say, this research was highly illuminating as to who in our society was receiving mentoring, what they were getting out of those relationships, and where there were critical gaps that needed filling. In response to this report, MENTOR engaged in many multi-year projects to further drive investment in those mentoring programs that could reach the most vulnerable, to build public awareness about the value of mentoring for those who need it the most, and to explore opportunities to grow the presence of naturally occurring mentors in the lives of youth. These efforts to date have centered on working with adults in educational, employment, and other systems to adopt a "mentoring mindset" that would allow them to build stronger relationships with the young people with whom they were already engaged. While much of this work built on MENTOR's decades-long legacy of growing the mentoring movement, the nuanced findings of that *Mentoring Effect* report allowed us to focus our efforts and dive more deeply into systems change work that could scale naturally occurring relationships and support programmatic expansions.

The years since that report have seen tremendous turmoil and changes in American life: political unrest and division, soaring rates of gun violence and mass shootings, some of the most charged racial justice protests in the nation's history in the wake of innumerable instances of state violence against people of color, and, most recently, a global pandemic that brought American life to a halt and seriously disrupted the webs of support not only for young people, but for the adults who care for them, as well. Simply put, the last decade has been a challenging time for the nation and especially for our young people.

Thus, MENTOR thought that the time was right to take a fresh look at some of these topics and to dig a bit deeper into the mentoring relationships that young people experience and the ways in which those relationships supported personal development and growth. As a movement-building organization, MENTOR also wanted to get a sense of how mentoring relationships have changed over time and whether we have been successful in our overarching mission over many decades to get more high-quality mentoring relationships to the nation's youth. Thus, the idea for the *Who Mentored You?* study was born.

GOALS OF THE STUDY

MENTOR launched this research project with four core goals in mind:

1. Taking a fresh look at the mentoring "gap" – While the nine years since the *Mentoring Effect* report represent a short time span in which to make societal-level changes in the experiences of young people, we did want to look for evidence that this gap is closing. Thus, part of this study involved collecting data from a similarly aged cohort of young adults about their mentoring experiences so that we could compare and contrast their stories with those from the prior report.

2. Creating understanding about the growth of the mentoring movement over time – MENTOR was founded in 1990 with the goal of providing the infrastructure and leadership needed to expand mentoring relationships for all the nation's young people. While many leading mentoring organizations have been operating for more than half a century (or even longer, in the case of organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters), our movement has lacked historical context. We know very little about the mentoring experiences of older generations — who found mentoring relationships and where, who didn't find them, who benefited the most from that support. Thus, one goal was to create multi-generational understanding of how all Americans have experienced mentoring and how the mentoring gap has shifted over the years, especially during the time frame that MENTOR has been trying to build a national movement.

3. Deepening our understanding of the value of mentoring on all American lives – Because we were taking a multi-generational approach, we realized that we had an opportunity to see how the benefits of mentoring may have played out over the lifespans of those who found these special relationships. By involving adults from the Baby Boomer, Gen X, and Millennial generations (see page 7 for more definitions and details for these terms), we were able to get a sense of how mentoring during childhood and adolescence supported their growth and, in some ways, the trajectories of their lives. While our methodology here would not enable us to prove causality around the impact of mentoring on lifelong achievement, we did investigate the perceptions of American adults about the contributions that childhood mentoring had on their life and the value that they felt it had brought to their journey through adulthood.

4. Examining the things mentors do that young people find valuable – While the *Mentoring Effect* report explored the types of support that mentors provided, it only scratched the surface as to how mentors built connections with young people, how they showed up during critical moments, and the ways in which they nurtured the development of mentees over time. This study represented a chance for American adults to tell their story about mentoring and how these caring adults made a difference for them. Given that mentors can provide myriad forms of help — everything from emotional support and identity exploration to skill-building and support navigating times of transition or crisis — we wanted to learn more about how exactly mentors made that difference. Throughout this report you will see not only statistical information about mentor support, but also plenty of quotes and testimony from adults of all ages about how their mentors helped them thrive — and, in some cases, just survive.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve these goals, MENTOR partnered with Pacific Market Research, a Seattle-based market research firm with a long history of conducting public polling that is inclusive of marginalized communities and voices. We also partnered with Dr. Sam McQuillin and the Youth Empowerment in Schools and Systems (YESS) lab at the University of South Carolina, who assisted with survey design and shepherding the study through its Institutional Review Board approval.

There were several stages and methods employed in the data collection process, which took place in two phases between March and October 2022.

- **Phase 1:** A mixed-methodology quantitative survey among American adults to quantify their experience with mentoring when they were young. Participants were residents of the United States ages 18–80, who were able to complete the survey in English or Spanish via a computer, tablet, smartphone, or over the telephone with a trained interviewer. One in five (22 percent) of the interviews were conducted via the phone. Priority was given to interviewers who represented a vast range of backgrounds and cultures, so as to ensure that those interviewed could speak to in-culture voices. Over half of the interviewers conducting the interviews identify with minority and under-represented groups such as LGBTQ+, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and those who speak Spanish as a first language. It should be noted that the telephone survey was shorter than the online version to better facilitate completion of the survey, thus, responses to some questions only reflect the online sample.
- **Phase 2:** This phase consisted of five focus groups with key demographic groups designed to further explore themes surfaced in the survey results. These groups consisted of one comprised of Gen Z young adults who were mentored through a program and another group who were mentored by adults they formed relationships with organically, as well as groups of individuals identifying as Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+, ages 18–40. A total of 30 individuals participated in these groups.

In the end, a total of **2,639 individuals** across the nation completed our survey, with almost half of those in the 18-to-24-year-old Gen Z cohort so that we could compare their mentoring experiences to similarly aged youth from the *Mentoring Effect* study of 2014. To ensure our ability to answer some meaningful research questions, key subgroups were oversampled to allow for sufficient subgroup cell sizes when inferring statistical reliability. The full generational breakdown is as follows in Table 1.

Age Group	# of survey responses
Younger Gen Z (those born between 2001 and 2004; currently ages 18–21)	**612**
Older Gen Z (those born between 1998 and 2000; currently ages 22–24)	**609**
Millennials (those born between 1982 and 1997; currently ages 25–40)	**522**
Gen X (those born between 1966 and 1981; currently ages 41–56)	**472**
Baby Boomers (those born before 1965; currently ages 57–80+)	**424**

Table 1 - Breakdown of Generational Representation in Survey Respondents

To ensure survey responses and insights were reflective and projectable of the U.S. population, sample balancing (weighting) was used to adjust for any variations in the study population that deviated from the actual proportions of the population (according to the 2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates). Weights were calculated by dividing the population proportion (desired proportion) for each group by the actual proportion of interviews collected for each group. This weighting allowed us to accurately mirror the true population of the United States in our reporting.

For this report, statistical significance is tested at a 95 percent level and significance between subgroups is noted by an up ▲ or down ▼ arrow. The margin of error for the survey results for the full sample is +/- 1.91 percent at a 95 percent confidence level.

DEFINING KEY TERMS

Readers will find the results reported here easier to follow with an understanding of a few basic terms used throughout this document.

Definitions of Mentoring

In this study, we wanted to examine mentoring relationships that Americans experienced between ages 6 and 21 that came from two broad sources: naturally occurring mentoring relationships that young people found with adults they encountered in the community or through places where they spent time, and programmatically provided mentoring relationships, in which a structured mentoring experience was provided through an organization or institution in a formal programmatic context. Here are the definitions that all respondents received:

- **Program mentoring:** Mentored through a **mentoring program whose purpose was to provide mentors to youth**. This program could have been offered through your school, a community organization, or a faith-based institution. The program would have specifically matched an adult with you, and you developed a relationship in a structured manner through regular meetings and activities. Sometimes these programs meet in groups, but commonly provide one mentor to each young person. An example of a mentoring program is Big Brothers Big Sisters.
- **Naturally occurring mentoring:** Mentoring outside of those specific programs that could have happened when an adult came into your life and you developed a **mentoring relationship naturally over time**. This adult might have been an extended family member, a neighbor or friend of the family, a coach, or a teacher with whom you formed a meaningful bond.

Generational Definitions

Given that one of the major goals of this study was to examine generational differences in the prevalence and quality of mentoring, we felt it was important to clearly define these generations for readers. The generational breakdowns used in our analyses represent the following current ages of respondents:

Generational Age Cohorts In This Study
18–24 years old (Gen Z): Those born between 1998 and 2004 • **18–21 years old (Younger Gen Z)**: Born between 2001 and 2004 • **22–24 years old (Older Gen Z):** Born between 1998 and 2000
25–40 years old (Millennials): Those born between 1982 and 1997
41–56 years old (Gen X): Those born between 1966 and 1981
57–80 years old (Baby Boomers): Those born before 1965

Other Demographic Definitions

The tables below offer further definitions and frameworks on some key self-reported demographics of respondents, as they were defined in this study:

Self-Stated Socioeconomic Status (growing up and currently)
Poor or low-income
Working class
Middle class
Upper middle class
Wealthy
Unsure/Refused

Sexual Orientation
Not LGBTQ+ (heterosexual/straight)
LGBTQ+ Net
Bisexual, pansexual, or queer
Gay
Lesbian
Asexual
Prefer to self-describe

Residential Location (growing up and currently)
Urban
Suburban
Rural
Don't know/Unsure

Educational Attainment
High school or less
Some college/technical/ vocational (includes Associates degree, Certificates)
Four-year degree
Postgraduate degree

Ethnicity
American Indian or Alaska Native
Asian
Black, African, African American or African Caribbean
Middle Eastern or North African
Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian
White
Prefer to self-describe

Hispanic Origin
No, not of Hispanic, Latino/Latina/Latinx, or Spanish origin
Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano
Yes, Puerto Rican
Yes, Cuban
Yes, another Hispanic, Latino/Latina/Latinx, or Spanish origin

The remainder of this report examines the initial findings from our analyses of the survey responses and focus groups. As noted previously, the representation of different voices here mirrors the current population of the United States, making these results truly reflective of the nation as a whole. The report centers on five major themes, each of which helps tell the story about how mentoring has grown and shifted in America over the last half century and where today's young people stand in terms of the prevalence of these relationships and their need for more mentoring. We end this introductory section with some quotes from respondents that illustrate the rich information respondents shared about their mentoring experiences (or the lack thereof).

"They helped me choose who I wanted to be in the future. They helped shape me into the way I am today. I know my self-worth because of them." —Survey respondent, age 19 (Gen Z)

"They gave me the tools to be successful and make overall good decisions when it came to my future. For example, I was taught how credit really works, how to navigate a job interview, and how to focus on building a savings account." —Survey respondent, age 22 (Gen Z)

"I suffered from depression from moving to a foreign country and having no friends and my mind was complete chaos. Having a mentor guided me back on track and made me more open to people I encounter and gave me more confidence." —Survey respondent, age 21 (Gen Z)

"Throughout all of my youth my parents ignored me, so two teachers I had at different times gave me the time and attention I needed to develop socially and personally." —Survey respondent, age 57 (Baby Boomer)

"Going into high school I did not have very many friends or much of a social life. It might have helped to have someone I trusted who could give advice on how to put myself out there and actually enjoy high school, rather than just tolerating it until I could move away to college." —Survey respondent, age 18 (Gen Z)

"My first [mentor] I would say that I really got closer to was when my teacher — one of my French teachers in high school. She was really young and I just like felt I could go to her about anything and I don't know. We'd always hang out with her and she would just always try to help us with schoolwork and I just knew she always had me and my friends' back, so I really liked her." —Focus group respondent, age 21 (Gen Z)

"As the first person in my family to attend school in the U.S., my mentors introduced me to and walked me through different opportunities that I would not have known about without them." —Survey respondent, age 21 (Gen Z)

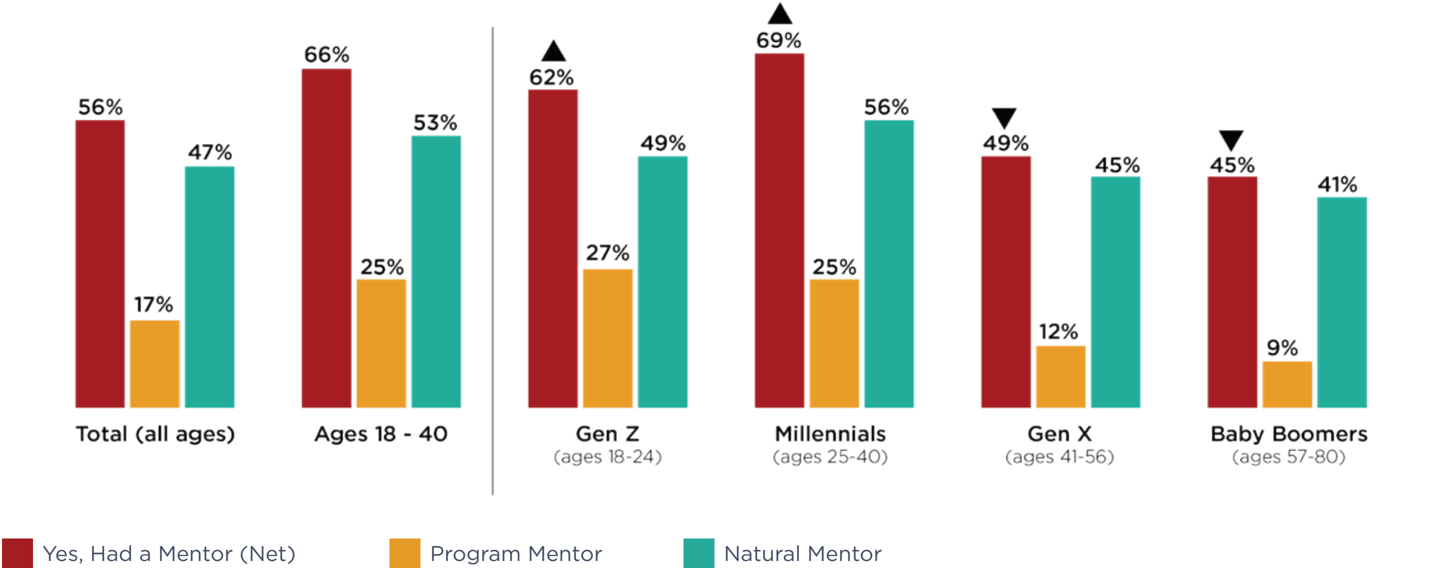
Theme 1

Americans report major increases in mentoring relationships over the last 30 years.

MENTOR was founded in 1990 with the goal of expanding mentoring relationships for America's young people, with an emphasis on relationships provided by dedicated programs to fill gaps in the lives of the most vulnerable. As policymakers and philanthropists were first beginning to scale their investments in mentoring programs, the early leaders at MENTOR (then known as National 1-to-1 in reference to the common programmatic structure of one mentor matched with one child) recognized that this burgeoning movement needed capacity-building support beyond just public and private investment in direct services. All those newly funded service providers would need guidance and professional development to deliver the highest quality services. And their programs would only be able to meet the demand for mentoring in every community if the American public was generally aware of the concept of mentoring, understood the value of these relationships, and were motivated to get involved in their communities. Thus, began more than 30 years of work to build the mentoring movement in the United States alongside service providers, researchers, and leaders in the public and private sectors.

Based on data collected as part of this study, it seems as though the work of MENTOR and others to grow the mentoring movement has been quite successful. As illustrated in Figure 1, the rates of mentoring have largely increased for the nation over the last several decades. In fact, Americans ages 18–40 are 47 percent more likely to have had a mentor growing up than those of the Baby Boomer generation and 35 percent more likely to have had a mentor growing up than those of Generation X.

Figure 1 - Prevalence of Having Had a Mentor While Growing Up by Generational Cohort



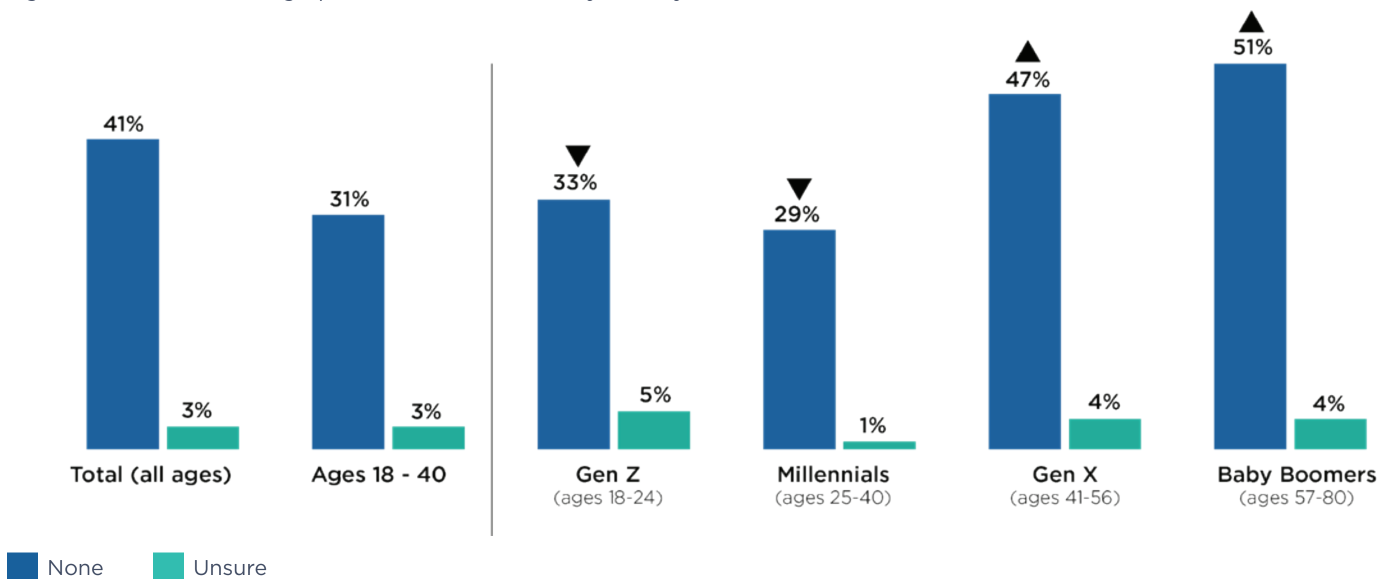
Just over half (56 percent) of all American adults say that they had at least one mentor between 6 and 18 years of age. Almost all of the growth in mentoring over these generations has come as a result of the growth of program-provided relationships. As shown in Figure 1, only 9 percent of Baby Boomers (those currently age 57 and higher) indicated they have a mentor that was provided to them through a formal service or programmatic experience. However, over one in four Gen Z youth (ages 18–24) indicate that they have had a mentor through a program, a three-fold increase over the last half century. Those in the Baby Boomer and Gen X generations were roughly four times more likely to have a naturally formed mentoring relationship than one through a program, but due to the tremendous growth in programmatic mentoring, the gap between naturally formed and program provided relationships has been cut in half for today's young people.

While it is heartening to see that young people have found considerable mentoring in their extended kinship networks and communities over the last half century, the prevalence of those naturally formed relationships has remained fairly stable. Thus, the rise in mentoring for Americans under 40 years old is largely due to the growth and expansion of mentoring programs and speaks to the tremendous investment and human capital that has flowed through the mentoring movement in recent decades.

Figure 2 illustrates the flipside of this growth, showing a general decrease in the percentages of Americans who said that they had no mentors growing up across the generations.

Looking at rates of mentoring across different subgroups reveals some interesting patterns about who has been finding mentoring throughout the generations.

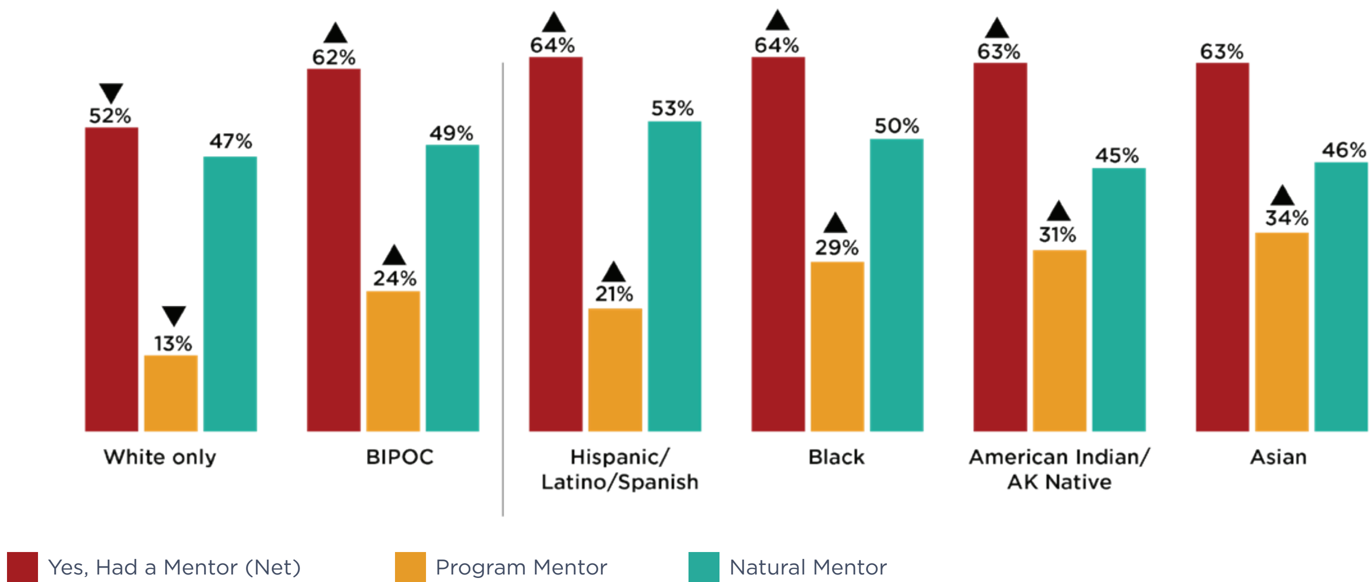
Figure 2 - Rates of Growing Up Without a Mentor of Any Kind by Generational Cohort



Mentoring Rates by Race and Ethnicity

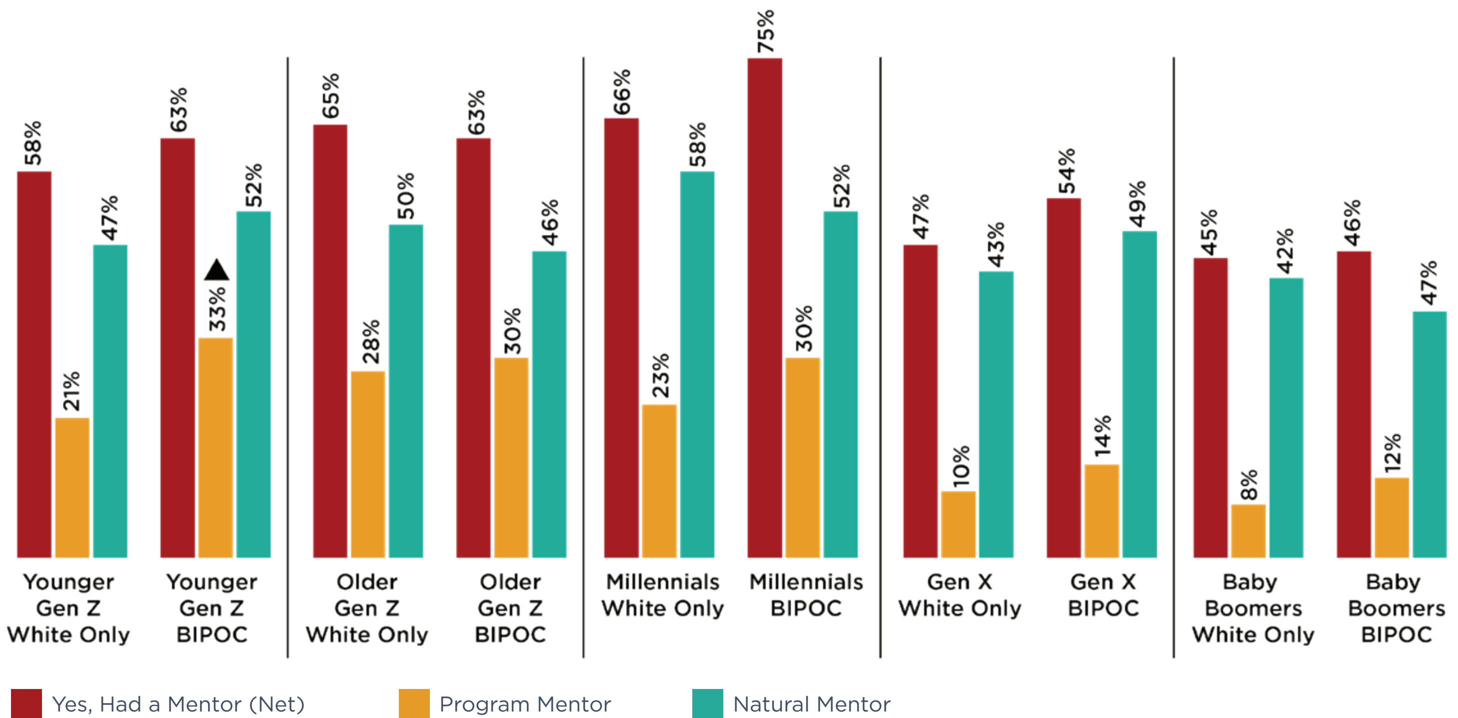
Figure 3 shows that Black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) are significantly more likely than individuals who identified as White only to have experienced mentoring relationships during their youth — with these differences being driven in large part by those program-provided relationships.

Figure 3 - Prevalence of Mentors by Race/Ethnicity



Comparisons *within* each generational cohort show a similar pattern, with BIPOC Americans of all ages reporting higher rates of mentoring overall, largely driven by higher rates of programmatic relationships. While these differences, illustrated below in Figure 4, did not reach statistical significance, they do demonstrate an overall pattern in which youth of color report more mentoring than their White peers, especially through programs.

Figure 4 - Comparing Rates of Mentoring Between BIPOC and White individuals by Generational Cohort



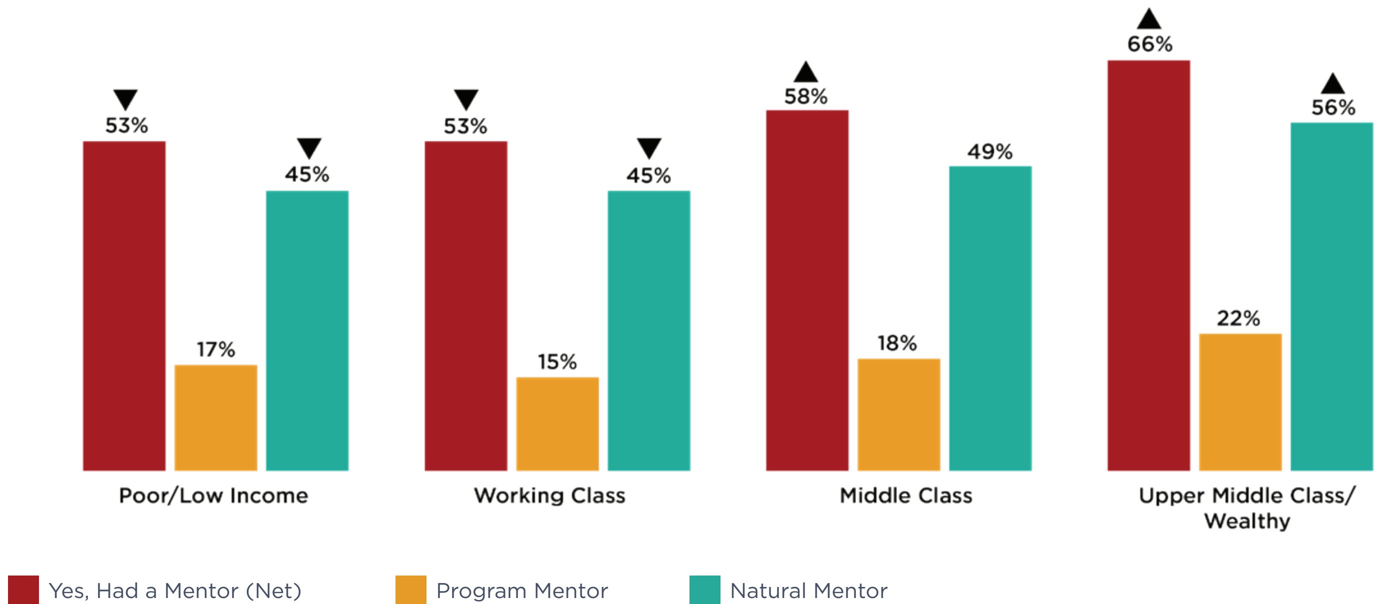
Mentoring Rates by Income Level During Childhood

One of the major findings in recent mentoring scholarship is that mentoring relationships, especially naturally occurring relationships, are considerably more prevalent among youth growing up in wealthier households (middle class or higher), with youth in lower income households reporting not only fewer mentors but also fewer of the "weak tie" connections with the types of highly resourced individuals who can provide new opportunities and access that would support educational and career pursuits. Simply put, youth from wealthier households have more access to mentors throughout their childhoods and greater odds of finding the types of mentors who support long-term achievement and economic success later in life.

[For an excellent research and discussion of these issues, see Raposa and colleagues' 2018 article on the intersections of socioeconomics and mentoring,[1] as well as recent articles by Gowdy (2020)[2] and Hagler (2018)[3].]

Unfortunately, we find a similar pattern in our results here. As illustrated in Figure 5, those who grew up in upper-middle-class and wealthy households across all generations reported significantly higher rates of mentoring overall, and of naturally occurring relationships in particular. While not statistically significant, those from wealthier households were also more likely to report more program-provided mentoring relationships.

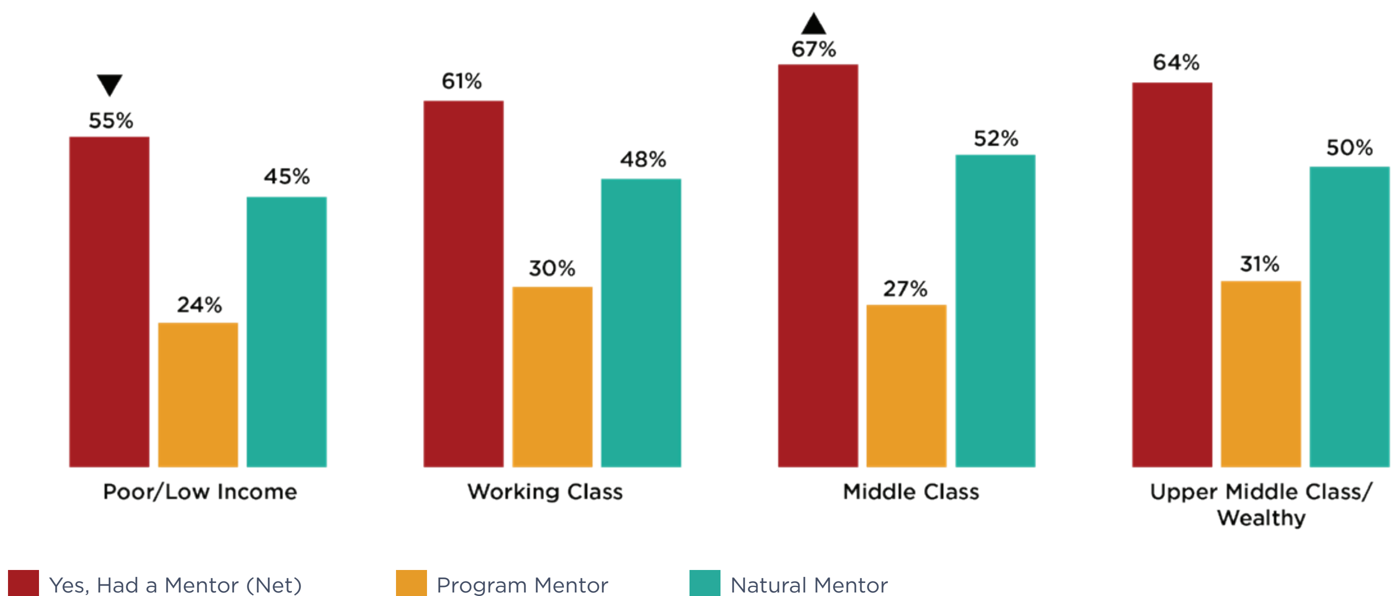
Figure 5 - Prevalence of Mentoring by Childhood Socioeconomic Status



This may seem counterintuitive at first: If mentoring programs are generally oriented toward those with the most needs, how is it that well-resourced youth from wealthier households are finding more programmatic mentoring? One likely explanation is that youth from wealthier families have increased access and flexibility to participate in a wide variety of programs, camps, hobby clubs, extended learning time opportunities, and artistic and recreational pursuits. These opportunities can be rather expensive, with the cost of enrollment or participation often precluding lower-income families from participating. Not only did more well-off youth find more natural mentors in these contexts, they also appear to have had more program-provided mentoring. When looking across all generations, almost half of those growing up in poor and low-income households (45 percent) had *no mentors.*

But what about young people today? Surely these statistics look different for the youngest respondents after several decades of expanding access to mentoring programs for the nation's vulnerable. As shown in Figure 6, the rates of mentoring for Gen Z (currently ages 18–24) look slightly better. While those growing up in the lowest income households are still least likely to have mentors, the advantages of the wealthy seem to have dissipated, with middle class youth most likely to say they have mentors. This suggests that our field has been somewhat successful in shifting mentoring increasingly toward working-class and middle-class youth. The wealth of the upper classes still buys a lot of access to mentors, but our field appears to be moving in an equitable direction.

Figure 6 - Gen Z Prevalence of Mentors by Childhood Socioeconomic Status

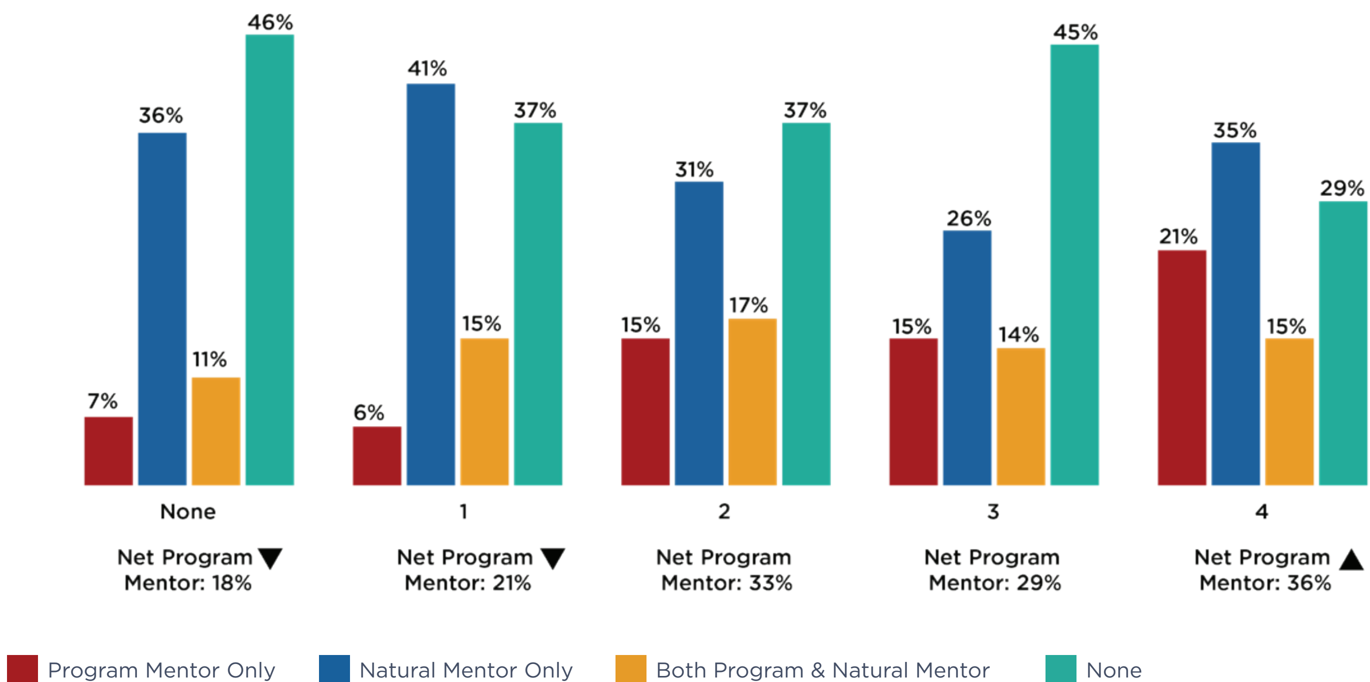


Mentoring Rates in Relation to Youth Challenges and Adverse Experiences

One of the main findings of the *Mentoring Effect* study almost a decade ago, was that mentoring relationships were, similar to the socioeconomic factors noted above, less common for youth who had experienced a number of traumatic events or adverse experiences in their lives. That report found "an inverse relationship between the number of risk factors an individual has and the likelihood that the individual has an informal mentor,"[4] with youth reporting no adverse experiences being 10 percentage points more likely to have a naturally occurring mentor than those who had at least one adverse experience. And while youth who reported at least one of those serious challenges were three times more likely to have had a programmatic mentor, they were also twice as likely to report remembering a time when they needed a mentor but didn't have one than their peers with no risk factors.

Nine years later, our findings suggest that our field has continued to shift mentoring services toward those who have experienced a number of challenges and negative circumstances. In this study, we asked respondents if they experienced a range of negative life experiences — homelessness, substance abuse in the home, having an incarcerated parent, food insecurity, getting in trouble with the law, spending time in the child welfare system, just to name a few — during their childhood and adolescence. What we find, as illustrated in Figure 7, is that programmatic mentoring services have been heavily accessed by those who have experienced the most risk factors.

Figure 7 - Prevalence of Program and Naturally Occurring Mentoring Relationships by Number of Adverse Life Experiences (Gen Z, ages 18–24, only)



In Figure 7 we see that for today's young people, those ages 18–24 in our study, the prevalence of mentors provided through programs (red bars) rises in alignment with the number of adverse life experiences. Those with four or more of these serious life challenges are twice as likely as those with none to have had a mentor through a program. We even find a smoother distribution of naturally occurring mentoring relationships across these different levels of negative life experiences. But, crucially, those with four or more of those adverse experiences are significantly less likely to say they had no mentor at all. This means that mentoring programs are really stepping in to fill gaps in the lives of those with the most needs and those who have been through the most challenging times.

For prior generations, we see a similar pattern of those with more serious needs getting increased relationships through programs, although the trend is less pronounced. But what is striking is that for older generations (Gen X, Baby Boomers), the prevalence of program mentors was extremely low, as shown in Table 2.

Age Group	Percentage of those with 4+ adverse life experiences who had program-provided mentors
Gen Z (18-24)	**36%**
Millennials (25-40)	**32%**
Gen X (41-56)	**21%**
Baby Boomers (57-80)	**15%**

Table 2 - Prevalence of Mentors Through Programs for Those with 4+ Adverse Life Experiences by Generational Cohort

Rates of Mentoring by Other Demographic Factors

Looking across all of the demographic variables of our respondents, we note just a few other relevant comparisons in the rates of mentoring for today's young people.

- For Gen Z (18–24) there were very few significant differences in the rates of either program-provided or naturally occurring mentoring across the **nine regions of the country** we examined, with the New England region representing the lowest rates of programmatic mentoring (while also having the highest rates of naturally occurring mentoring), and the western part of the upper Midwest and the Pacific region having the highest rates of programmatic mentoring.
- We also found higher rates of mentoring for **those living in non-English speaking households**, where only 25 percent of young people said they had never been mentored or were unsure, compared to 38 percent for those in English-speaking households.
- We also found higher rates of programmatic mentoring for young people who grew up in **urban areas** (32 percent), especially compared to their rural peers (only 21 percent). You can read more about the urban rural divides in mentoring in the next section on Theme 2.
- We did not see any differences in rates of mentoring via programs or naturally formed relationships for Gen Z youth who identified as LGBTQ+ compared to those who did not.

Factoring in "Meaningful People"

One of the concerns in doing a study like this is that older generations may simply have been less aware of the concept of a mentor, and while they may have had plenty of mentors in their life, they may simply have never placed this label on these individuals in their mind. This has major implications for our reporting on the rates of mentoring over time: Is it possible that we are measuring familiarity with mentoring concepts rather than the actual presence of mentors in the lives of individuals? Are people today simply more likely to call any caring person a mentor? To address this concern, we asked survey respondents to share if they ever had a "meaningful person," defined as "anyone with whom you spent time or who did a lot of good things for you, not including your immediate family or people that lived inside your home." While this definition allows for the inclusion of peers, romantic partners, and others, our hope was that it would also capture a number of mentor-type individuals who may not have been identified as such.

Figure 8 shows the breakdown of meaningful people and mentors across all respondents, while Figure 9 shows that there have been shifts in reports of meaningful people and mentors across the generations. Those in the Baby Boomer and Gen X cohorts were much more likely to say that they had meaningful people in their life, but no mentors (or neither). But these generations were also twice as likely as those in the Gen Z or Millennial cohorts to say they had nobody to support them in the ways they needed — no meaningful people or mentors. Clearly these generations were lacking in support from the adults around them compared to recent cohorts. While this information doesn't completely answer our question about whether younger cohorts simply recognize mentors more than those in older generations, it does seem that those older generations are able to differentiate between the role of a mentor and the support they received from other adults who were not mentors. This gives us greater confidence that our findings around the growing prevalence of mentors are reflective of reality.

Figure 8 - Prevalence of Meaningful People and Mentors

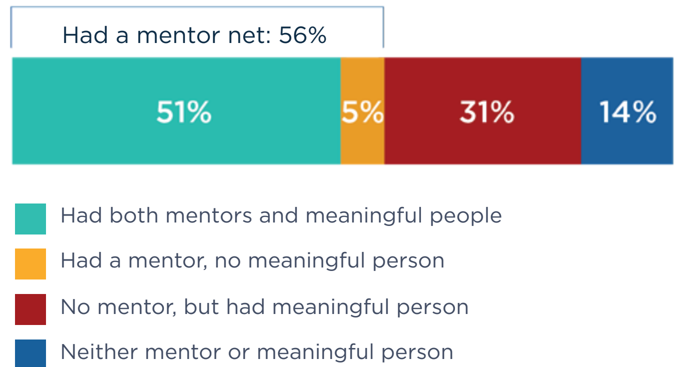
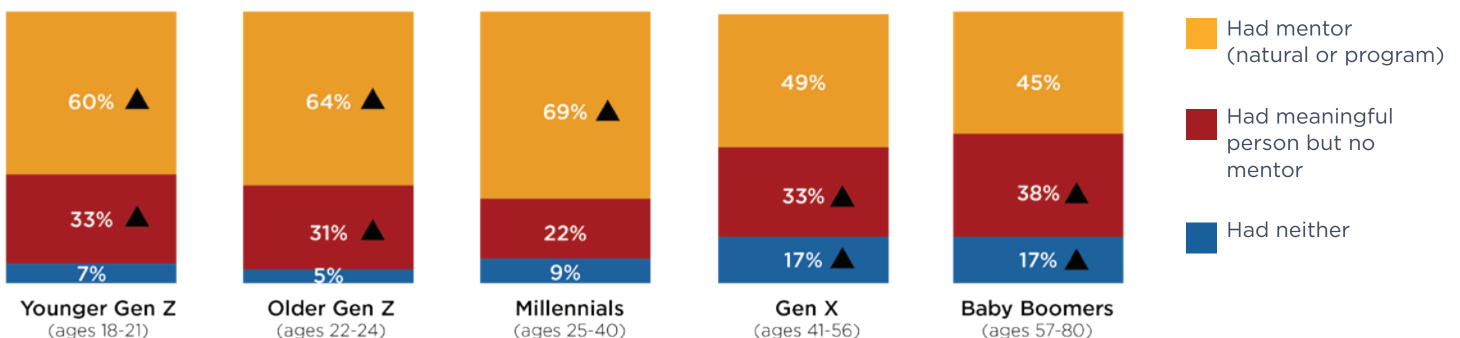


Figure 9 - Prevalence of Mentors and Meaningful People by Generational Cohort



Barriers to Mentoring

It is also worth noting that Baby Boomers (those age 57 or older) were more likely than younger Americans to note barriers to finding mentors in their youth, which also lends credibility to the narrative that they experienced fewer mentoring relationships than young people today. As shown in Figure 10, Baby Boomers are more likely than other generations to cite a range of barriers to developing a mentoring relationship, including not knowing how to find one, not understanding what a mentor was or the value of a mentor, not having access to a mentoring program, and not having adults available to be mentors.

Across all groups, the top two barriers to developing a mentoring relationship while growing up are not knowing how to find a mentor and not understanding what a mentor was or the value of having one. This means that although the work of MENTOR and other organizations has certainly increased awareness of mentoring over the last 30 years, there is still work to be done, as a fairly persistent one-in-three Americans is still unsure about what mentoring is or the impact it can have on their lives. It is worth noting, however, that it is unrealistic to expect the developing minds of young people to fully grasp the value of a mentor in their life, as that represents an extremely mature and long-term perspective that is rare in adolescence, let alone childhood. Thus, it is vital that we get messages about the value of mentoring to parents and other caregivers so that they can maximize their child's exposure to mentoring opportunities. See Theme 4 for more information on the impact that American's felt mentoring had on their lives.

Figure 10 - Barriers to Mentoring by Generational Cohort

	Younger Gen Z (ages 18-21)	Older Gen Z (ages 22-24)	Millennials (ages 25-40)	Gen X (ages 41-56)	Baby Boomers (ages 57-80)
You didn't know how to find a mentor	42%	52% ▲	37% ▼	45%	51% ▲
You didn't understand mentoring or the value of having a mentor	37% ▼	36% ▼	37% ▼	36% ▼	49% ▲
There were no mentoring programs available to you	27% ▼	25% ▼	25% ▼	31% ▼	45% ▲
Your parent or guardian was not interested in you having a mentor	27%	27%	21%	23%	27%
No adults were available to mentor you	26%	21% ▼	25%	19% ▼	33% ▲
Programs available to you didn't fit your life	19% ▲	16%	22% ▲	12%	11% ▼
Other kids your age looked down on mentoring	17% ▲	10%	17% ▲	6% ▼	12%
You were on a waitlist for a program but never got a mentor	11% ▲	9% ▲	9% ▲	11% ▲	2% ▼
Other reasons	1% ▼	4%	3%	4%	7% ▲

How Many Mentors Did Americans Have Growing Up?

For those curious about how many mentors youth found growing up, and the ages at which they found them, Figure 11 may be helpful. While the structure of our survey did not allow us to identify the exact number of individual mentors each youth had, this figure shows the distribution of total mentoring relationships (both through programs and those that are naturally occurring) by youth age range. Program-provided mentors seem to be most prevalent when youth are 16–18 years old (the mean is less than one because we include youth with no mentors, this becomes 2.47 program mentors on average if limited to those who did have a program mentor). Naturally occurring mentoring relationships peak at 19–21 years of age, when the average young person has 1.79 mentors (2.17 if we exclude those who had no naturally found mentors).

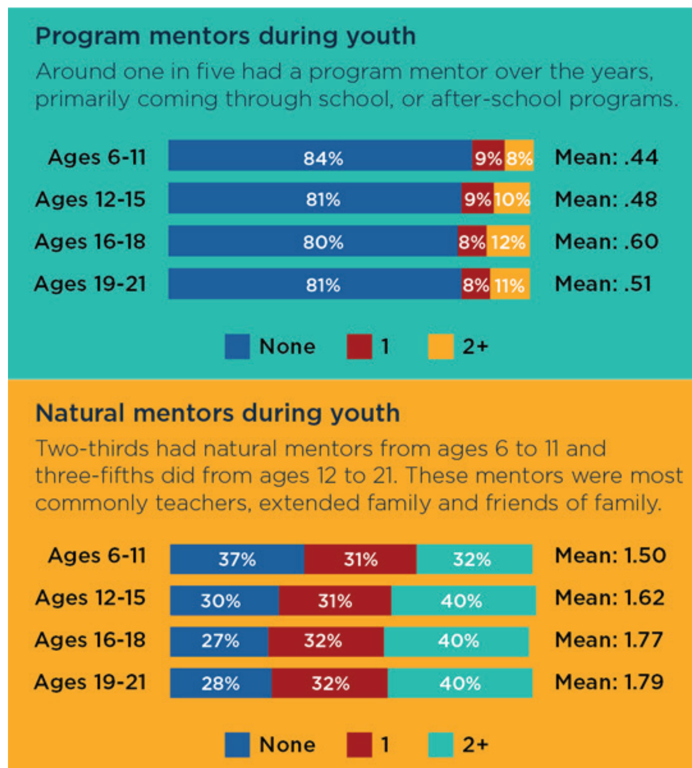


Figure 11 - Volume of Mentors Across Age Ranges by Mentor Type

In conclusion, we find plenty of evidence in this study that American young people today are finding far more mentoring than those in prior generations. From the Baby Boomers of the 1950s and 60s to the young people of Gen Z today, we find a significant and largely steady increase in the percentage of Americans who say they had mentors growing up. Our findings suggest that we have done a good job as a movement in driving programmatic mentoring experiences to young people of color, those growing up in poverty, and those who have experienced the most adversity growing up, especially in the last 30 years, as MENTOR and other organizations have worked to bring mentoring to those with the most need. We see trends in these data that we are removing some barriers to mentoring, while others have stubbornly persisted over the generations. But, in general, we feel encouraged by this evidence that the mentoring movement has grown and expanded the opportunities for meaningful relationships in young peoples' lives. But, as we explain in the next section, this work is never done, and there are troubling signs that the strain on the nation over the last decade is starting to erode some of the progress our movement has made to bring mentoring to the lives of all young people.

Theme
2

Unfortunately, today's young people are reporting increases in the mentoring gap.

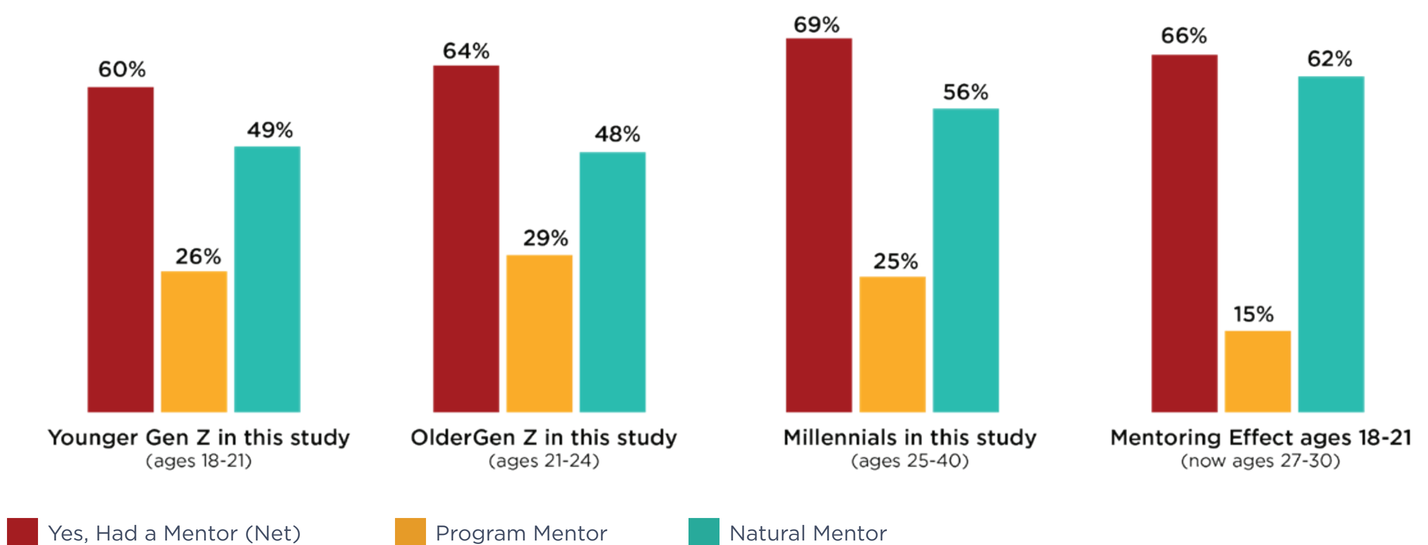
As noted in the Introduction, one of the major goals of this study was to compare the findings here to those from the *Mentoring Effect* study almost a decade ago. That prior study had focused on the responses of 1,109 young adults ages 18–21, who were asked to reflect back on the mentoring they had received while growing up. The thinking was that by asking young adults about their mentoring experiences, their fresh memories could provide insights into the value of those relationships that were not diminished, or overly enhanced, by the passage of time.

To replicate that cohort from 2013, we oversampled young adults in this survey, ultimately surveying 1,221 young adults ages 18–24. We extended that range up to age 24 because much of MENTOR's work focuses on the needs of young adults as they transition into college and career options, and we felt it was important to include their voices. Thus, the findings here represent the responses of 612 young adults ages 18–21 (the pure comparison with the *Mentoring Effect* cohort) and 609 young adults ages 22–24.

One of the main questions we wanted to answer was whether the "mentoring gap" — the finding that one in three young people were growing up without a mentor — had closed at all in the last decade. Our hope was that the trend of increasing rates of mentoring over time had continued over to the young people of today and that today's 18-to-21-year-olds might report a slight increase in the presence of mentors in their lives compared to those of a decade ago.

Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case. As shown in Figure 12, for Gen Z, especially the youngest members (18–21), there seems to be a decrease in the presence of mentors in their lives. The 18-to-21-year-olds from the *Mentoring Effect* are now ages 27–30, at the younger end of the Millennial generation, and as one can see, their overall rates of

Figure 12 - Rates of Mentoring by Generational Cohort Compared with Prior Findings



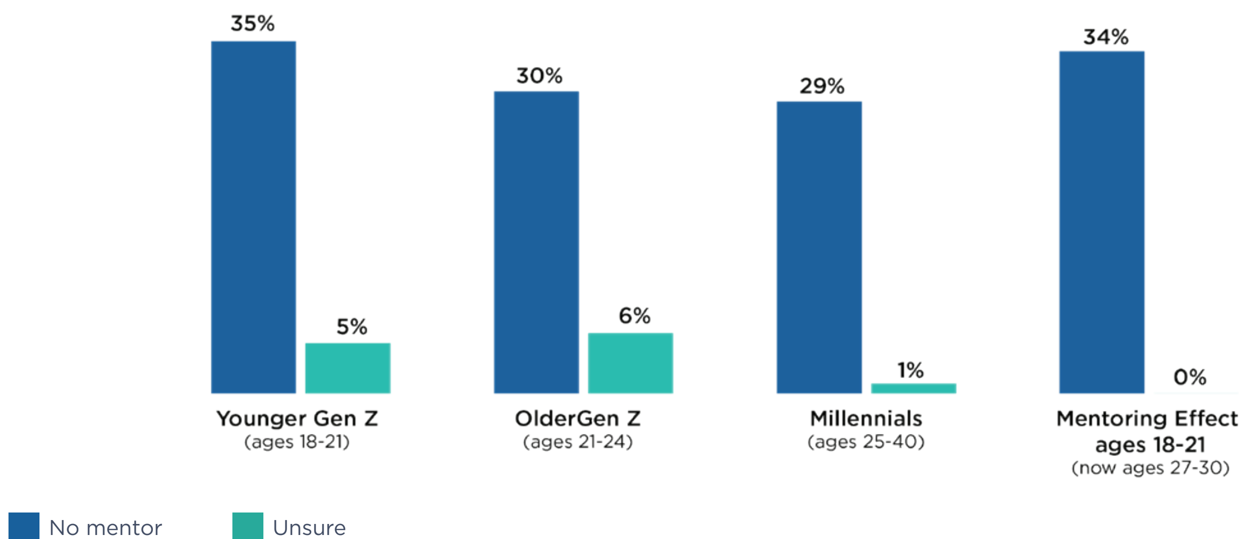
mentoring are fairly similar to the Millennial cohort captured in this study. The *Mentoring Effect* young adults reported fewer programmatic mentors, which may be the result of slight differences in the definitions used in the two studies. They also reported slightly higher rates of naturally formed mentoring relationships. But their overall rates of having had any mentor are similar to their same age peers.

But on the left side of Figure 12, we see some concerning trends. When comparing today's 18-to-21-year-olds to their peers from a decade ago in the *Mentoring Effect*, we see that today's youngest adults are six percentage points less likely to have had a mentor overall and 13 percentage points less likely to have had a naturally sourced mentor. Compared with Millennials from our current study, they are nine points less likely to have had a mentor of any kind.

Even when compared to their slightly older peers, today's 18-to-21-year-olds are less likely to have had mentors overall, especially program-provided mentors. This trend is clearest when looking at the percentages of respondents who said they didn't have a mentor or were unsure (Figure 13).

Figure 13 shows a clear trend in which the younger our respondents were, the more likely they were to say they didn't have a mentor or to be unsure if they had. The youngest members of Gen Z are five points more likely to say they didn't have a mentor compared to young adults who are just a few years older than them. At best, they are holding steady with their same age peers (18–21) from the *Mentoring Effect*, which is not exactly the progress we would hope to see after another decade of trying to get mentoring to all American youth, but especially those with the most to gain from the experience.

Figure 13 - Rates of Not Having a Mentor by Generational Cohort Compared with Prior Findings



This trend is even more pronounced when race is considered. Figure 14 shows a comparison of mentoring rates between individuals identifying as White Only or BIPOC across Millennials and the older and younger members of Gen Z. As one can see, rates of program-provided mentors have actually increased for the youngest BIPOC members of Gen Z and their overall rates of mentoring are the same as their slightly older peers. But for White youth, the shift has been sudden and dramatic — 18-to-21-year-olds who identify as White Only have experienced a big drop in programmatic mentoring relationships and in their rates of mentoring overall.

We also find other worrisome trends around race and ethnicity. For example, although American Indian and Alaskan native individuals had rates of mentoring comparable to other races and ethnicities in our full multi-generational sample (37% said they had no mentor), we find that those rates have plummeted for Gen Z tribal youth, with 43% saying they have had no mentor. Within a generation, Native Americans have gone from one of the groups most likely to have had mentors to the group least likely to report them.

We see similar declines in mentoring for Gen Z youth, particularly that 18–21 group, when examining other subgroups of youth. For example, when looking at LGBTQ+ individuals (Figure 15), we note a similar directional (although not statistically significant) decline between rates of mentoring between Millennial-age Americans and today's Gen Z young adults. In the case of LGBTQ+ individuals, we don't see the same within-cohort differences that we do for White and BIPOC individuals, but we do see that same overall pattern of declining rates of mentoring.

What's Behind This Trend?

There are several factors to consider as to why the mentoring gap seems to be widening. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the **COVID-19 pandemic,** which shut down most mentoring programs for considerable amounts of time, while also limiting the access the nation's youth had to their naturally sourced mentors in schools, workplaces, afterschool programs, sports and recreation clubs, and even in extended kin networks.

Figure 14 - Comparison of White and BIPOC Rates of Mentoring by Generational Cohort (Gen Z and Millennial Only)

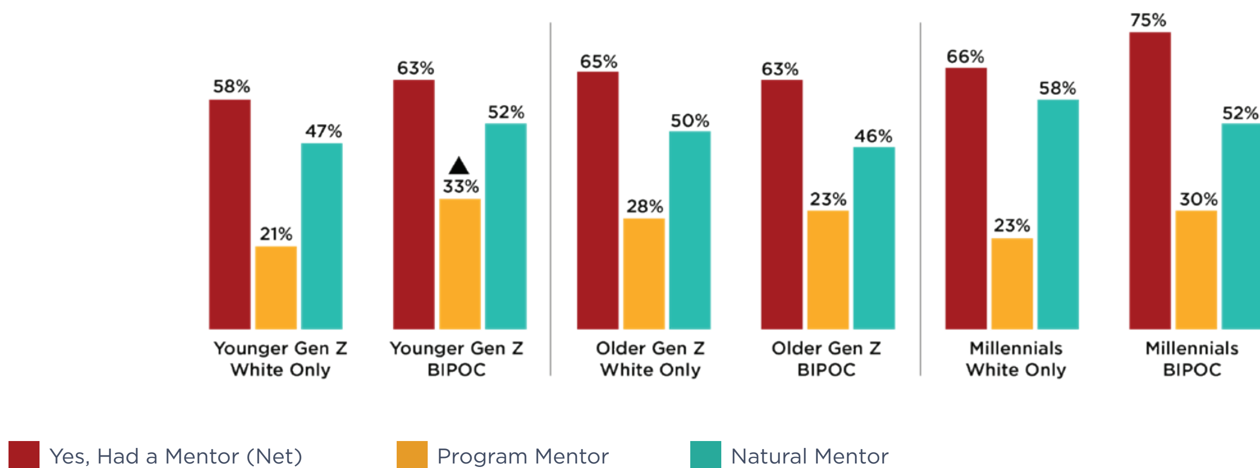
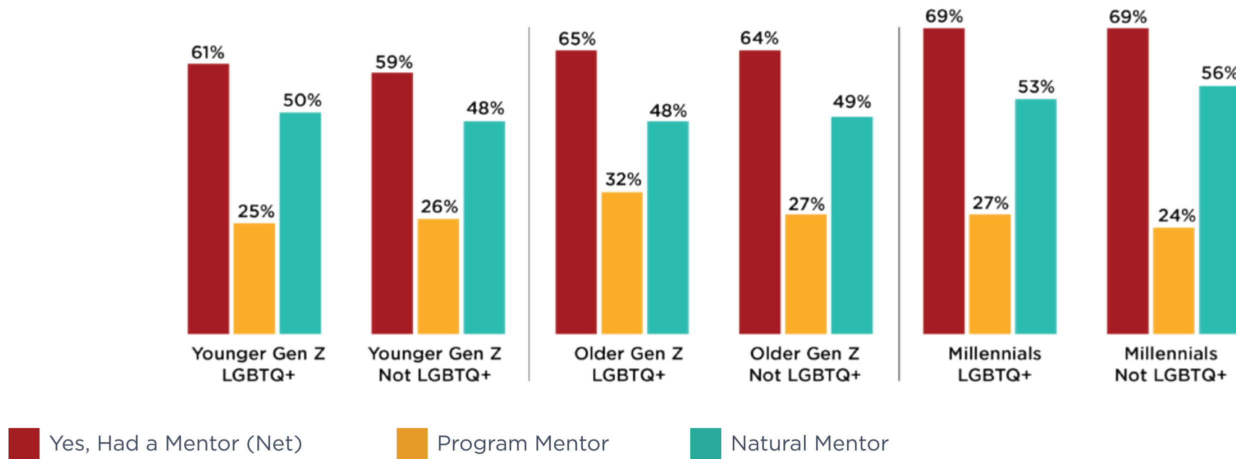


Figure 15 - Comparison of LGBTQ+ and Non-LGBTQ+ Rates of Mentoring by Generational Cohort (Gen Z and Millennial Only)

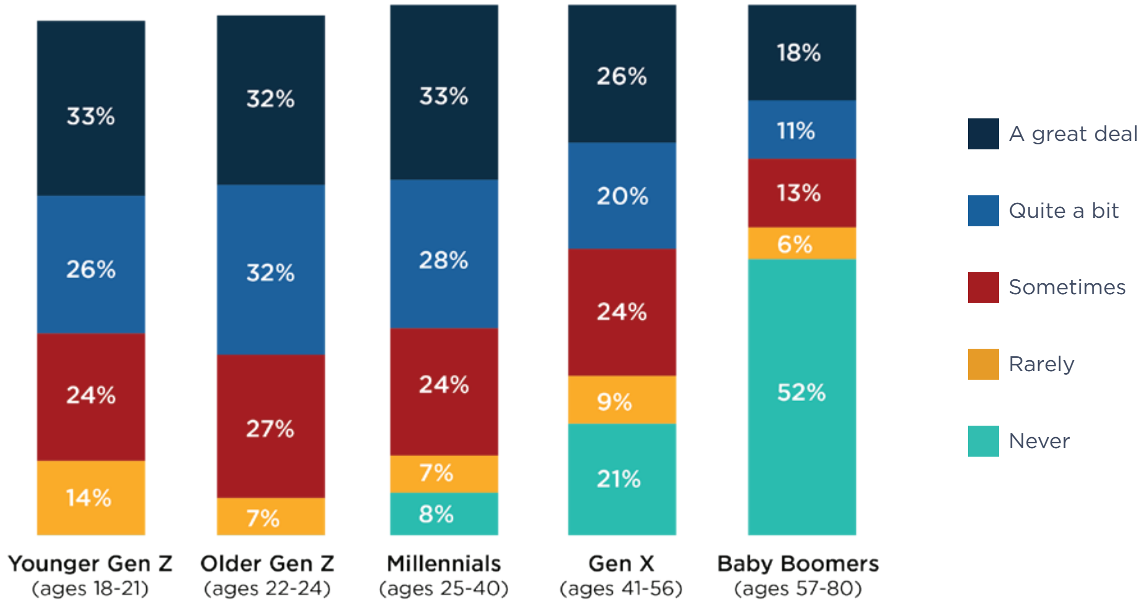


But the pandemic is insufficient to explain this gap in its entirety. The statistics reported here are representing mentoring that could have happened *at any point in time* between 6 and 21 years of age. That's a 15-year window in which to have had a mentor while growing up and the vast majority of our respondents were over 18 years of age when the pandemic hit, meaning that it wouldn't have influenced their rates of mentoring much at all. But when looking at Gen Z we see that those who are currently 22–24 also have reduced rates of mentoring, even though the pandemic would have only impacted one of those 15 possible years in which to find a mentor.

For those currently in the 18–21 age range, it is without question that the pandemic hindered the availability of mentors when they were 15–17 years old. And we see some evidence of that in findings like those presented in Figure 16, which shows a large spike for that 18-to-21-year-old cohort in no longer or rarely still getting advice from their mentors — many of those mentoring relationships likely ended when the pandemic hit and closed both mentoring programs and the institutions where youth build relationships with natural mentors. It is also worth remembering that this nation lost more than a million people to COVID-19 — that's a lot of mentors who are no longer with us. Those younger members of Gen Z are twice as likely as their slightly older peers to no longer be in contact with their mentors, and the pandemic likely explains that spike. Older Gen Z young adults had already exited the programs of their youth and had already learned to communicate with their naturally sourced mentors outside of the institutions where they met. Those younger members of Gen Z didn't have that chance, as the pandemic cut them off from mentors in ways that likely limited their communication or the chance to deepen the relationship moving forward.

But even if the pandemic restricted or ended mentoring experiences for young adults when they were in their late high school years, that still leaves them with many years prior to the pandemic where they could have had mentors but didn't. While the next section of this report goes much deeper into who wanted mentors but didn't have them during their childhoods, we can see in Figure 17 those youngest members of Gen Z (18–21) reporting *wanting* mentors more than their older Gen Z and Millennial peers at all age ranges during their childhood, suggesting that this group was missing out on mentoring long before the pandemic hit.

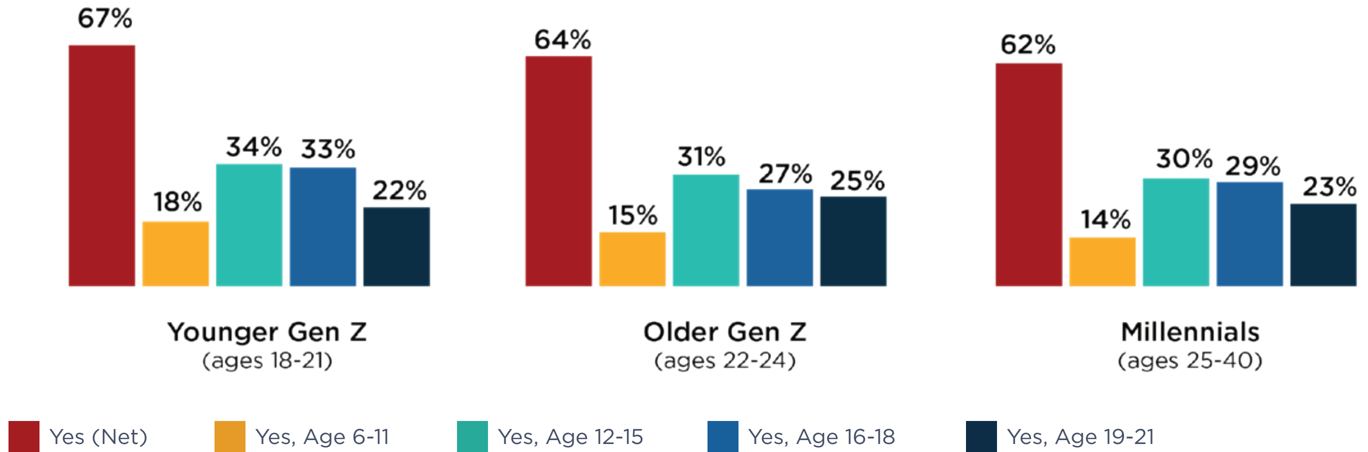
Figure 16 - Percentages Still Drawing Advice from Their Mentors by Generational Cohort



Across the age ranges, they are three-to-five points more likely to have wanted mentoring throughout their childhood compared to their generational peers. The two years of the pandemic clearly don't completely explain these trends.

So, if the pandemic doesn't fully explain this decline in the rates of mentoring, what does? It's hard to tell from the data we have collected here, although ongoing analyses may uncover additional explanations. But, based on conversations with leading scholars and mentoring thought leaders, we speculate that a number of factors are in play beyond the COVID-19 pandemic:

Figure 17 - Comparison of Times When Youth Wanted a Mentor but Did Not Have One by Generational Cohort



- **Growing socioeconomic equality in America –** Rates of volunteering are historically dependent on adults having the free time and resources to make volunteering for uncompensated work a viable option. Unfortunately, America is caught in a cycle of wage stagnation for the working and lower classes, with tremendous wealth continually being transferred to the already-wealthiest individuals. These trends go back more than 40 years in American economics,[5] but they have accelerated considerably in the last decade. As a result, increasing numbers of American adults are finding they need to take second and even third jobs, which severely limits their ability to volunteer, including in mentoring programs. Working long hours or multiple jobs to make ends meet likely also means less time to build natural relationships with youth in the immediate community. We also know that the pandemic and stress of modern life[6] have limited the ability of Americans at all socioeconomic levels to be their optimal selves and show up for others. The bottom line is that when American adults are stressed beyond their means, the mentoring support to the nation's youth will wane.
- **Deepening racial and class divides –** The last seven or so years in America have, in some ways, seen meaningful progress on race issues, as many White Americans have committed to examining difficult concepts, such as the role of racial privilege in their own success, how they can serve as allies to people of color and other marginalized groups, and the ways in which institutional power often reflects white supremacist underpinnings. But for all that progress, we have also seen tremendous backlash against these concepts, with many Americans choosing to lean into racial divides and refusing to examine systemic racism in general or the impact of systemic prejudice on the lives of others. Long dormant white nationalist movements are growing in scale and prominence and are targeting many of the communities most directly supported by the nation's mentoring programs. It is certainly possible that, as notions of "us and them" have deepened in America, many adults have withdrawn from environments and activities where they could have served as mentors to young people. Those who view minoritized youth and families as an existential threat, no matter how hateful or absurd the proposition, are increasingly unlikely to offer their support to those young people.

- **Growing specification of who mentoring is intended to serve –** It is interesting to note that rates of mentoring are down most sharply for White youth and are declining for those from wealthier households. In this study we also noted that the growth of mentoring has been slower in rural areas than in suburban or urban locations (see Table 3 below, which compares the rates of mentoring for Gen Z and all generations for those who grew up in urban, suburban, and rural areas). At the same time, we see evidence, as discussed in the previous pages, of the growth of mentoring, especially programmatic mentoring, for middle-to-low-income youth, youth of color, youth in non-English speaking households, and other groups where young people may be experiencing marginalization. It is possible that in our efforts to provide mentoring to the young people who need this support the most, we may have unintentionally delivered the message that mentoring is only for some youth, or that it is primarily a tool for promoting equality. While those are admirable goals, over time, they may create the impression that mentoring is not for everybody and may even create a stigma around mentoring, as discussed below.
- **Shifting barriers to finding mentoring –** Revisiting Figure 10 (page 19), we see that the youngest members of Gen Z (18–21) report some challenges to finding mentoring that have grown in prominence for their cohort: not being able to find a program that meets their needs, lingering on program waitlists for a mentor when they do, and even a bit of social stigma around having a mentor. The first two of these speak to a field that perhaps created more demand than it could meet, while also perhaps not diversifying enough to meet the needs that the youth and families served present. But that "social stigma," in which peers would look down on mentoring or feel that it indicates being in dire circumstances, again implies that we have created strong associations between the act of mentoring and the serious needs of those most often being directed to programs, even though all young people need and deserve mentors, regardless of their circumstances.

	Urban Gen Z	Urban Overall	Suburban Gen Z	Suburban Overall	Rural Gen Z	Rural Overall
Overall rate of mentoring	59%	56%	68%	55%	60%	57%
Program Mentor	33%	20%	30%	17%	21%	13%
Naturally occuring mentor	44%	45%	52%	48%	50%	50%

Table 3 - Comparison of Gen Z and All Generational Cohorts for Rates of Mentoring by Geographic Location

These are only speculative reasons, but it does seem plausible that rates of mentoring would be on the decline at the end of a 7-to-10-year stretch in which the nation faced considerable turmoil and strife, with deepening divides along race, class, educational, and geographic lines. It would be naive to think that the mentoring field could avoid the impact of these factors that have tested the resolve and capacity of every other facet of American life.

While our first theme in this report is a cause for celebration, this second one is a call for re-commitment to the cause, a reminder that the work of bringing more mentoring to the lives of more youth is never done. At best, the growth of our field has stagnated; at worst, fewer young people are getting the benefits of mentoring than when MENTOR released the ***Mentoring Effect*** a decade ago. While we can appreciate the growth in our movement, the work must continue. In fact, the work actually represents a tremendous opportunity to bring Americans of different backgrounds together to begin addressing some of what ails the nation.

Theme 3

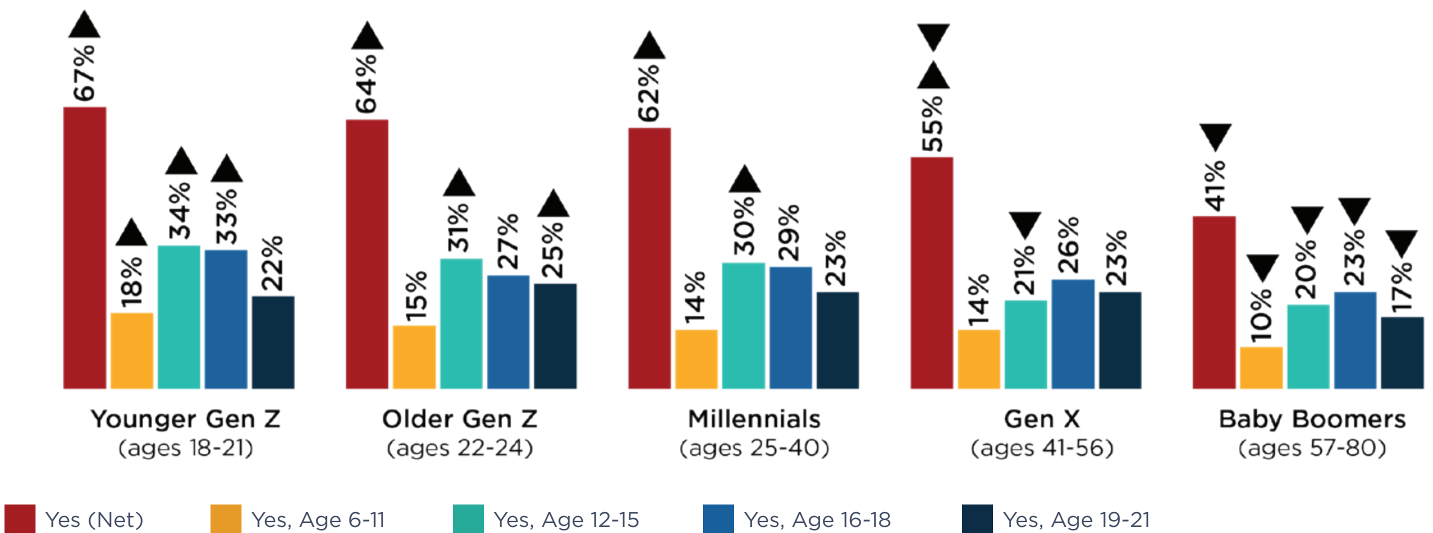
Even when mentored, most youth remember times when they wish they had mentoring.

While the previous two sections focused on rates of having had a mentor while growing up, here we present an alternative way of thinking about the need for mentors. One of the problems with sorting the nation's young people into "mentored" and "not mentored" buckets is that it assumes those who had a mentor perhaps got what they needed from the relationships, sometimes even a singular relationship, that separated them from their unmentored peers. The reality is that even if one had a mentor in, say, middle school, that relationship may not have been very helpful in high school, when new challenges and situations emerged. Even for youth who are lucky enough to have a close mentor who sticks with them from the elementary years into young adulthood, there is no guarantee that their mentor has all of the skills, advice, and connections needed to fully support them on their long journey to adulthood. Even the best mentors have their limitations. And we certainly can't assume that youth who had a mentor at some point got all the mentoring they needed.

To reframe how we think about the prevalence of mentors in the lives of young people, we asked survey respondents to think about times growing up when *"you did not have a mentor but wished you had an adult outside of your immediate family who you could turn to for guidance and support either through a mentoring program or a naturally occurring mentoring relationship?"*

The initial results to this question are presented below in Figure 18. This certainly paints a different picture about the need for mentors than current conceptualizations of the mentoring gap.

Figure 18 - Comparison of Unmet Mentoring Needs by Age and Generational Cohort



As we can see, the rates of having unmet needs for a mentor have climbed substantially over time, with the younger members of Gen Z (18–21 years old) being over 60 percent more likely than Baby Boomers to remember a time they wanted a mentor and didn't have one. Now, some of this may be the result of today's young people being more aware of what a mentor is and how it might benefit them than prior generations. This might also reflect the tendency of older adults who tend to not remember times of turmoil and struggle from many years ago — they may be under-representing the times when they felt alone as they dealt with a challenge.

But these results are certainly sobering. The rates of needing a mentor and not having one exceed the actual rates of mentoring for Gen Z! Roughly 66 percent of all Gen Z had times of unmet mentoring need, while also reporting a mentoring rate of 62 percent. One could argue that it's not that uncommon for youth to encounter some challenges, wish for a mentor, and then get one. And certainly, many of the youth who expressed an unmet need here did later get the support they were looking for. But looking at the spread of need across age ranges, it certainly seems as though many young people likely went years without having the mentoring support they yearned for. And they were likely keenly aware of this need based on some of the qualitative responses they provided in our survey.

"When I was struggling in school. My grades were pretty bad and were not getting better. I wish someone would have been there to help me."

—Survey respondent, age 24 (Gen Z)

"When I was depressed and didn't have friends it would have been nice to have someone to talk to about it and tell me it would be ok."

—Survey respondent, age 23 (Gen Z)

"Was struggling with mental health, and my parents didn't believe mental health was a thing."

—Survey respondent, age 24 (Gen Z)

"Transitioning from being a teenager to an adult, I could have really used an outside perspective. Topics like renting an apartment, finding a career path, or just discussing the future with someone could have really benefitted me in a way that I could've had more confidence by the time I arrive to where I am currently at. There's a lot of uncertainty right now."

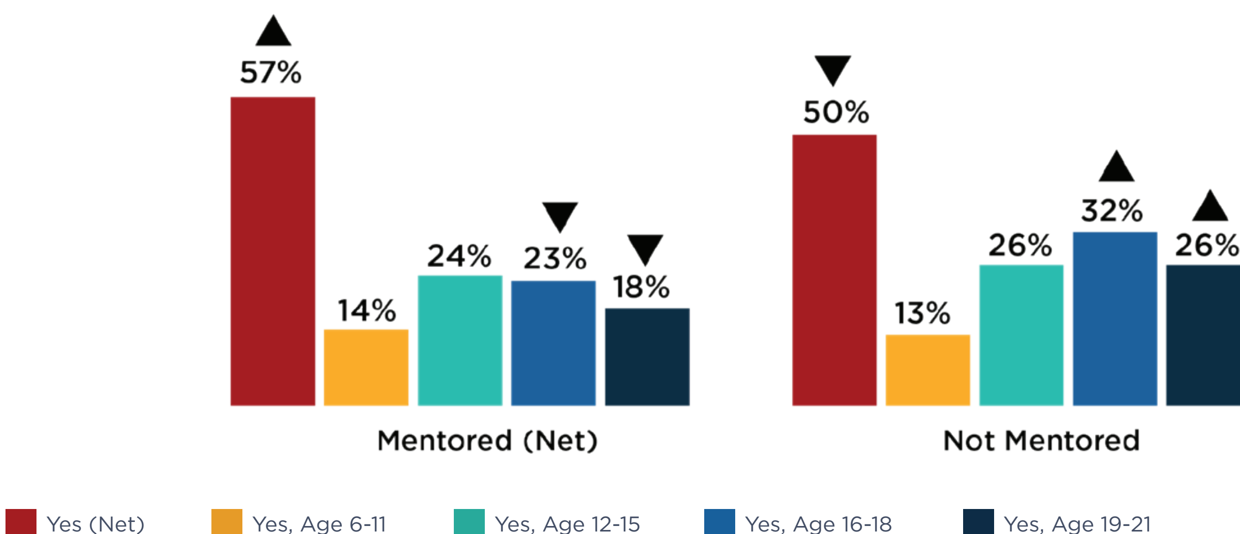
—Survey respondent, age 21 (Gen Z)

While it is heartening to know that most American youth do *find* mentoring relationships, these quotes are a reminder that those times when mentors are absent can feel like an eternity and can exacerbate trauma that can last a lifetime. It serves as a poignant reminder that mentors are needed throughout childhood and adolescence — and throughout the human lifespan, really.

Interestingly, we find that those who did find a mentor are even more likely to remember a time where they wanted one but didn't have one (see Figure 19). Once again, this could be a reflection that those who really want a mentor often find one, but it could also indicate that those who understand the value of mentoring may want *even more* mentoring — even if they have a current mentor who is meeting some of their needs.

And for those wondering if there is any historical comparison with the *Mentoring Effect* study on this topic, there is. That report found that 29 percent of the young adults in that survey could remember a time when they were facing a challenge they needed help with but didn't have a mentor to turn to. That percentage is much lower than what we found in this study — their peers in the Millennial generation in this study indicated that 62 percent of them could remember such a time. Now, the *Mentoring Effect* study did find that 43 percent of youth with two or more "risk factors" could remember a time of unmet mentoring need. At the time of this report, we have not examined these unmet needs by number of adverse experiences, but given that the overall percentage today is still much higher, we have to assume that there would still be stark differences between the two studies. It is unclear what explains this gap in remembering these times of unmet need. It is possible that differences in how the questions were asked simply elicited different responses. Regardless, it remains true that *millions* of today's young people remember times when they desperately needed the care and love of a mentor and didn't have it.

Figure 19 - Rates of Unmet Needs for Mentoring by Whether Youth Had Mentors or Not



Variations in Unmet Need by Demographic Factors

We do find some differences in unmet mentoring needs by various demographic factors and once again, as noted above, we see patterns suggesting that those who report higher rates of mentoring also had times of unmet need.

When looking by race and ethnicity, we see that individuals identifying as BIPOC report more unmet mentoring needs than those identifying as White, as shown in Figure 20.

As expected, youth growing up in lower income households were more likely to remember times when they wanted a mentor but did not have one to turn to (Figure 21).

Figure 20 - Unmet Mentoring Needs by Race and Ethnicity

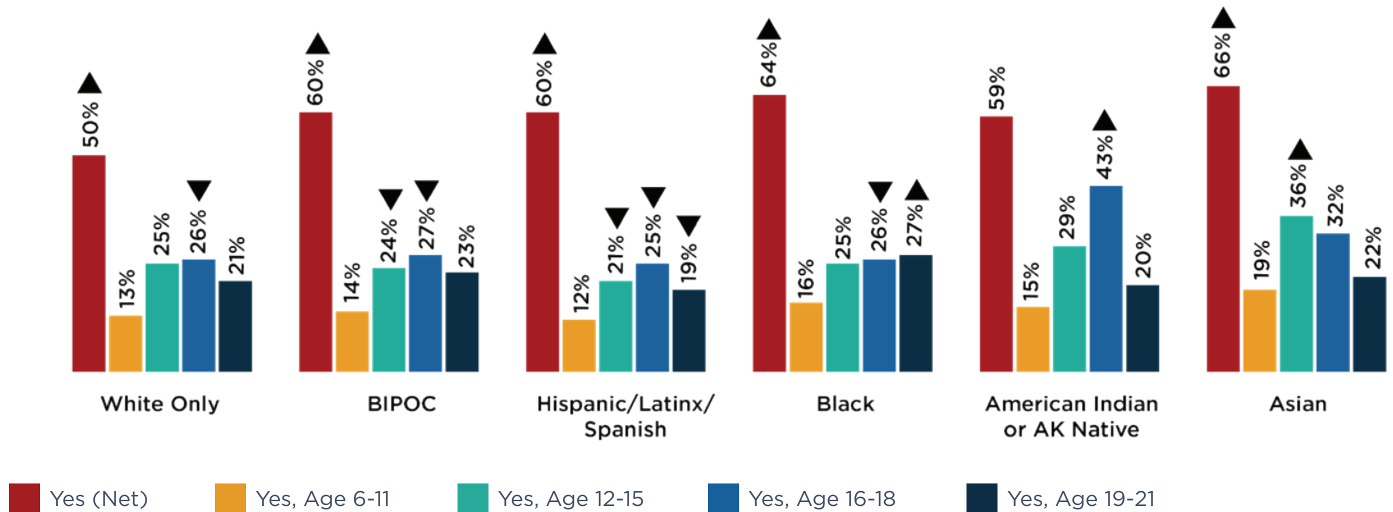
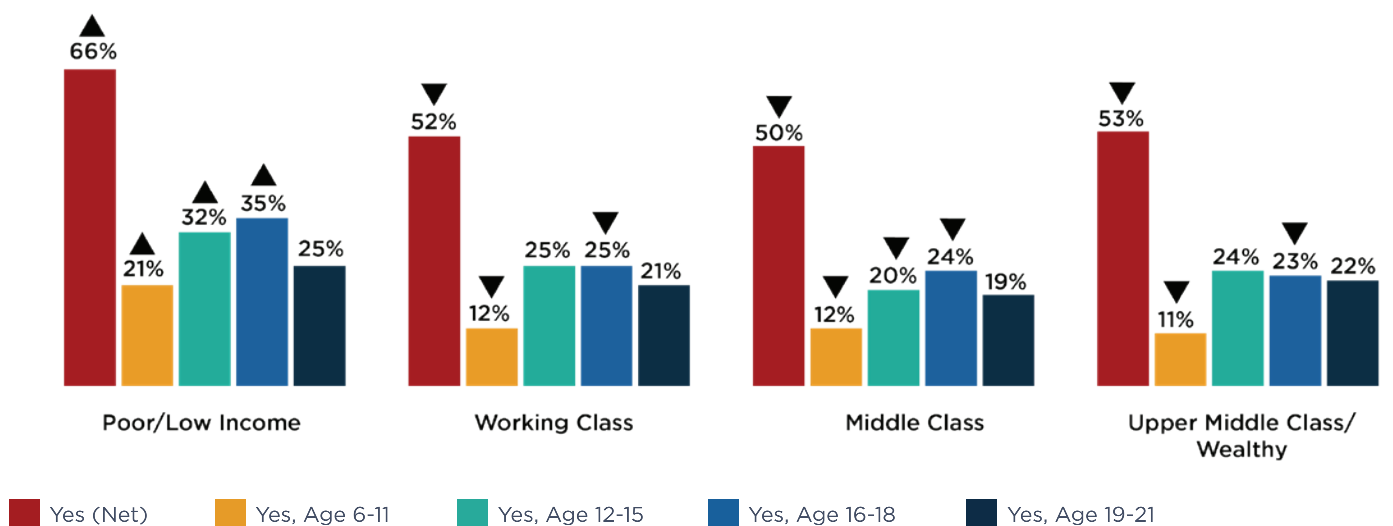


Figure 21 - Unmet Mentoring Needs by Socioeconomic Status Growing Up



We also find higher unmet mentoring needs for other groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals (Figure 22) and those growing up in urban and suburban areas (Figure 23). We did not find any statistically significant differences by region of the country, educational attainment, whether English was the primary language spoken in the home, or by changes in socioeconomic status from childhood to adulthood.

Figure 22 - Unmet Mentoring Needs Comparing LGBTQ+ and Non-LGBTQ+ Individuals

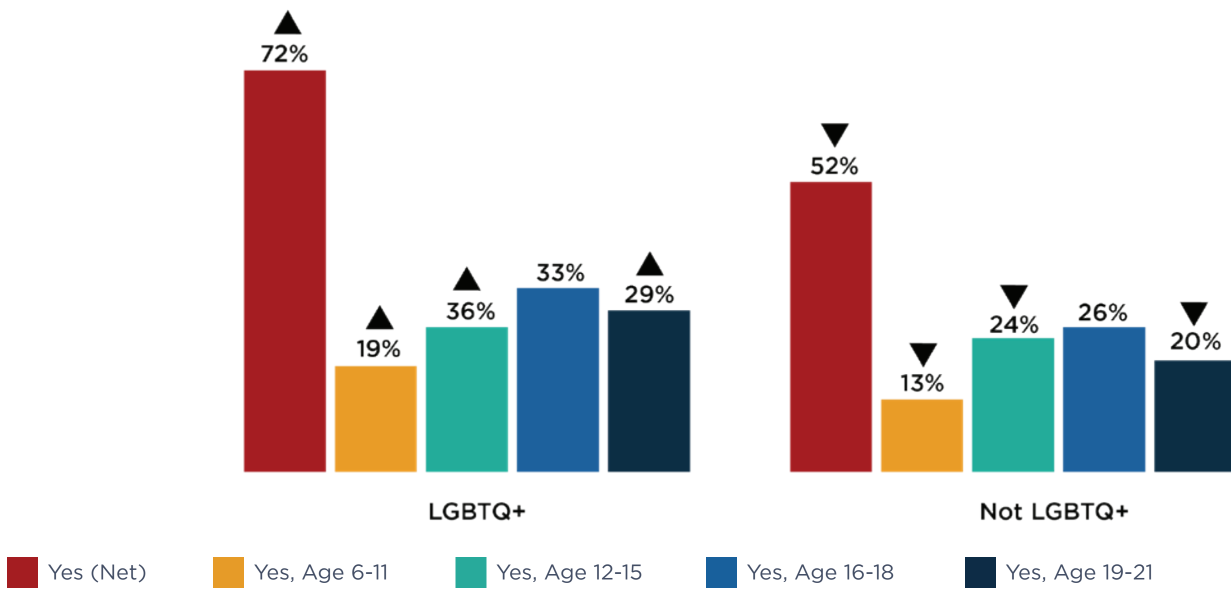
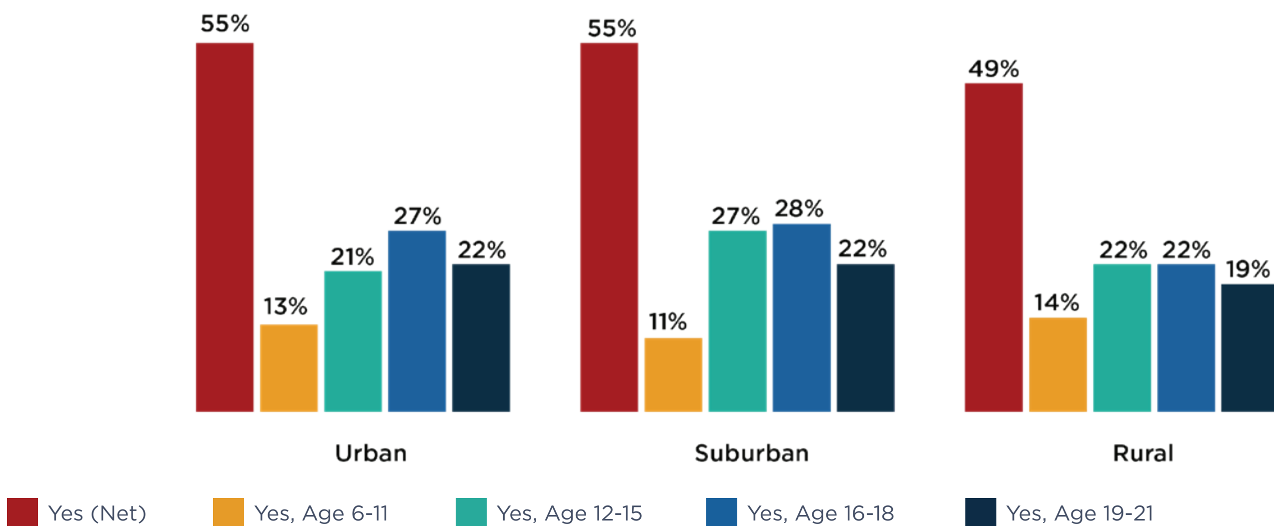


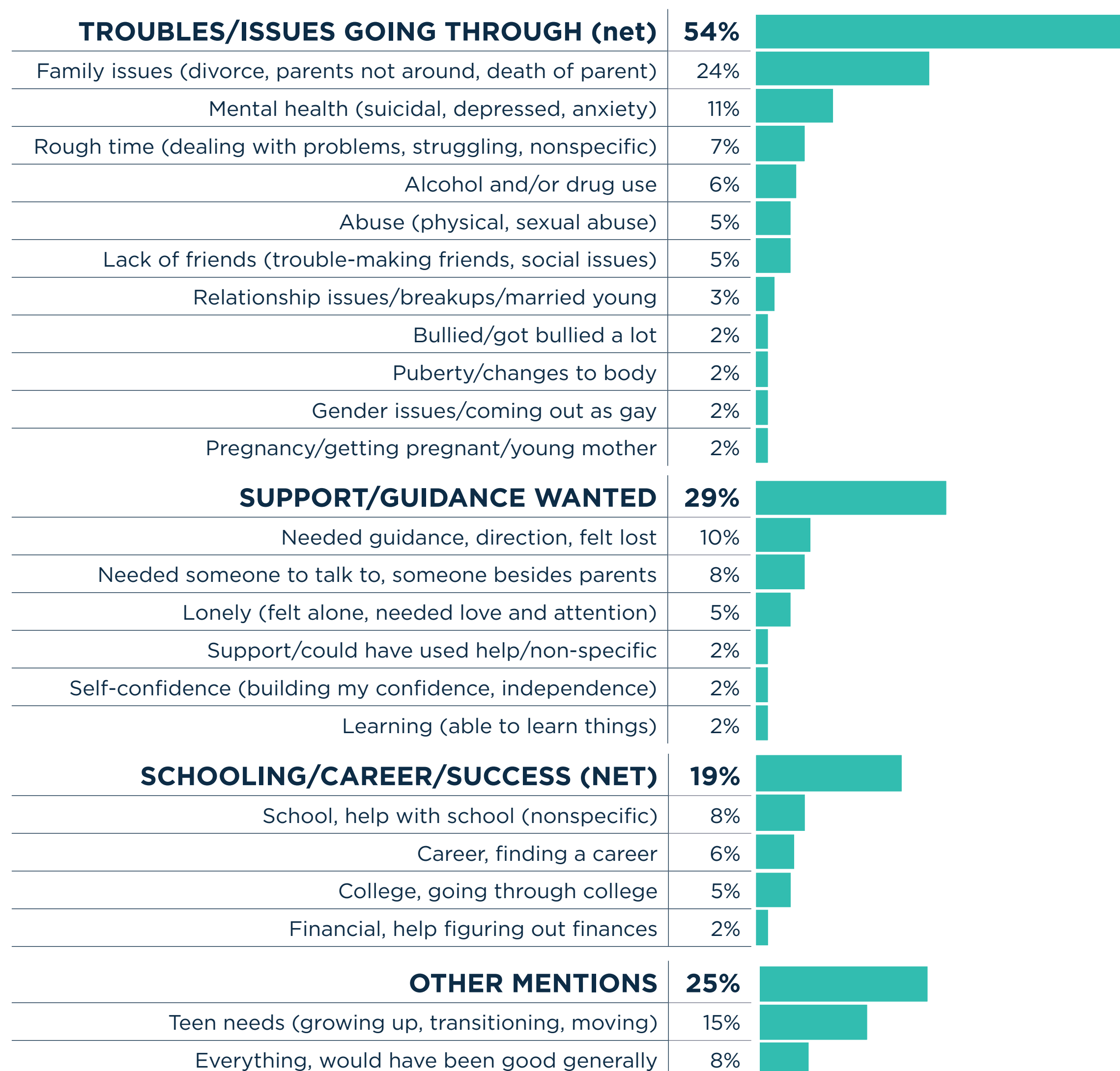
Figure 23 – Unmet Mentoring Needs by Location Lived While Growing Up



Challenges Faced During Times of Unmet Need

In addition to simply asking about times of unmet need, we also asked survey respondents about why they wanted the support of a mentor at those times. Figure 24 presents some of the leading reasons that individuals reported, clustered into four major categories: Troubles/Issues, Support/Guidance, Schooling/Career, and Other, which focused mostly on needs around overall development and growth as a young person. Most respondents selected a number of items in response to this question, suggesting that mentoring needs are often not centered around one top-of-mind need but rather around a complex and diverse array of challenges and development opportunities. Over half (54 percent) of those who wished they had a mentor at a key time did specify a serious issue or major challenge.

Figure 24 - Types of Mentoring Needs During Periods of No Mentoring



We also see trends when looking across generations as to how the unmet needs for mentors have changed over time. There is some variation by age cohort regarding circumstances where Americans feel they would have benefited from a mentor. Baby Boomers are more likely to mention family issues, such as divorcing parents, and substance abuse challenges. Today's young people are more likely to reflect back on needs related to mental health and depression, whereas Millennials (those currently 25–40 years old) are more likely to mention needing career and financial advice. Gen X are more likely to mention having wanted support with transition points in the teen years, such as moves. Key differences in circumstances by generation are detailed further in Table 4.

	Younger Gen Z (18-21)	**Older Gen Z** (21-24)	**Millennial** (24-40)	**Gen X** (41-56)	**Baby Boomer** (57-80)
TROUBLES//ISSUES GOING THROUGH (net)	**60%**	**51%**	**50%**	**49%**	**64%**
Family issues (divorce, parents not around, death of parent)	16% ▼	17% ▼	22% ▼	23% ▲	37% ▲
Mental health (suicidal, depressed, anxiety)	25% ▲	17% ▲	11% ▼	6% ▼	7% ▼
Rough time (dealing with problems, struggling, nonspecific)	9%	9%	10%	4%	5%
Alcohol and/or drug use	1%	3%	4% ▼	6%	12% ▲
Abuse (physical, sexual abuse)	5%	4%	4%	6%	6%
Lack of friends (trouble-making friends, social issues)	8%	7%	4%	6%	3%
SUPPORT//GUIDANCE WANTED (net)	**34%**	**35%**	**29%**	**24%**	**29%**
Needed guidance, direction, felt lost	6%	9%	11%	10%	11%
Needed someone to talk to, someone besides parents	10%	14% ▲	5% ▼	6% ▼	7%
Lonely (felt alone, needed love and attention)	5%	5%	7%	3%	7%
Self-confidence (building my confidence, independence)	5% ▲	2%	1% ▼	1% ▼	2%
Learning (able to learn things)	4% ▲	4% ▲	3%	1% ▼	>1% ▼
SCHOOLING//CAREER// SUCCESS (net)	**15%**	**17%**	**26%**	**20%**	**15%**
School, help with school (nonspecific)	8%	11%	10%	7%	7%
Career, finding a career	2% ▼	2% ▼	8% ▲	7% ▲	5%
College, going through college	3%	4%	7%	7%	3%
Financial, help figuring out finances	1% ▼	1% ▼	6% ▲	1% ▼	1% ▼
OTHER MENTIONS (net)	**20%**	**23%**	**23%**	**30%**	**21%**
Teen needs (growing up, transitioning, moving)	12% ▼	13%	11% ▼	20% ▲	14%
Everything, would have been good generally	6%	8%	11%	9%	5%

Table 4 - Needs Associated with Times of Unmet Mentoring by Generational Cohort

Of all the trends represented in Table 4, it is especially worth noting the significant and stunning rise in mental health needs for the members of Gen Z. Today's 18-to-21-year-olds express unmet mentoring needs around depression, anxiety, and suicidality at *four times* the rate of Baby Boomers and more than double the rates for Millennials. They are even 47 percent more likely than their slightly older 22-to-24-year-old peers to cite mental health challenges as the main area where a mentor could have helped. That spike is almost certainly driven by the pandemic to a large degree, but other factors noted in this report — civil unrest, deepening inequality, etc. — may also help explain the sudden rise.

Thanks to the work of millions of mentors, the dedication of thousands of service-providing organizations, massive investment by public and private supporters, the insights of a generation of researchers, and the promotional efforts of advocacy organizations like MENTOR, our field has built an awareness of the power of mentoring in this country that spans the generations discussed in this report. American youth are getting more mentoring and they are yearning for even more.

And statistically speaking, today's youth and young adults are more aware of the value and availability of mentoring than any generation that came before them. But that awareness comes at a bit of a price: our young people know what they are missing when mentors and caring adults are not there and you can sense that void in the quotes and numbers presented here.

The findings in this section reinforce a simple truth of the mentoring movement: There will *always* be a need for more mentoring and expanded networks of support for youth, even if we make tremendous progress in closing that mentoring gap. The journey to adulthood is fraught with unforeseen challenges, new opportunities, and transitions both planned and unexpected for all young people — no one mentor can be there for all those moments over all those years. The challenge to the adults of America is to be attentively listening to our young people so that we can respond in those moments where, in their eyes, finding a mentor to lean on seems painfully elusive.

Theme 4

Americans attribute much of their success in life to mentors.

One of the challenges in mentoring research is that we often judge the impact of these relationships on relatively short timelines. For the school-based program, we hope to see fairly immediate changes in attendance, school connectedness, and even grades and graduation rates. For other programs the emphasis is on improved attitudes or avoiding risky behaviors while the mentoring relationship is in place or shortly thereafter. For programs serving late teens, the emphasis is almost always on graduation, college access and enrollment, and entry into the job market — almost always in the small handful of years post-program.

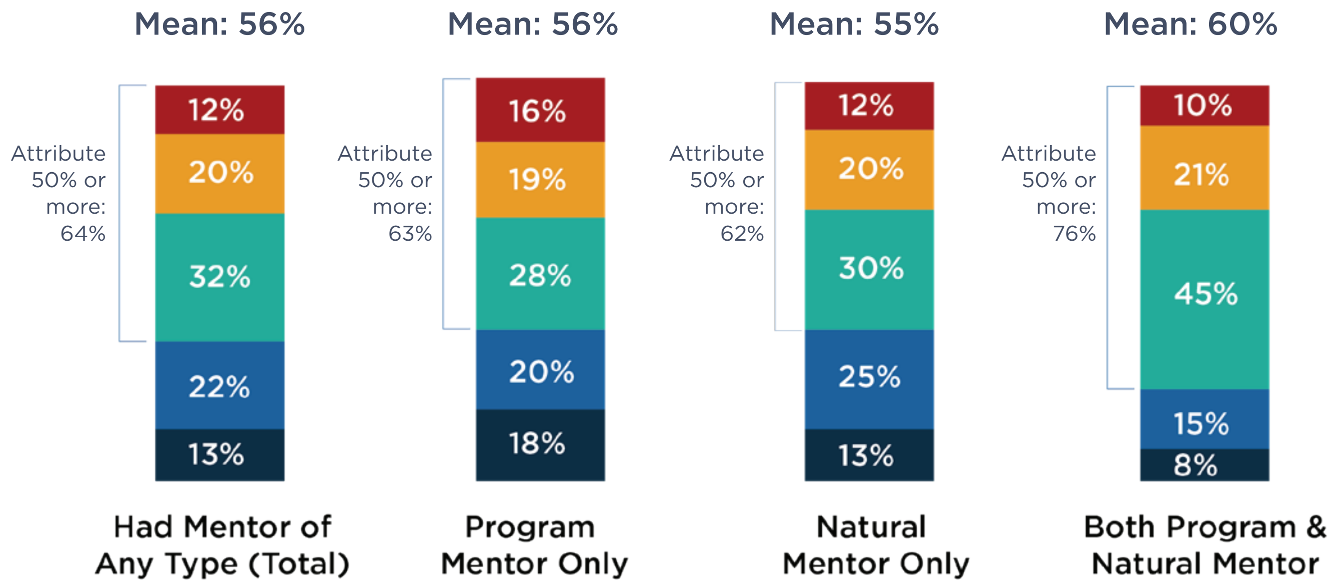
To be clear, these are all laudable and meaningful short-term goals. But what we often lack, in turn, is information about the "long tail" of mentoring — these subtler shifts in the trajectory of a life or the impact of small bits of wisdom that might not be detectable until much further down the road, when a young mentee is a fully developed and (hopefully) contributing member of society. For all the great research in this field, we still have a need for longitudinal perspectives that can tell us how mentoring experiences during our formative years influence our successes and failures over the lifespan. When a community mentors, say, a group of middle school students, what does that mean for those individuals, or for that community, 30 years later?

While the findings presented here don't offer definitive answers to these questions, we did ask our multi-generational sample to tell us a bit about how mentoring influenced who they are today and about the impact of these early life experiences on the years and decades that followed. What we find here is that American adults give a massive amount of the credit for how their lives have turned out to their mentors.

To begin unpacking the value that Americans thought mentoring had brought to their lives, we first asked a question very early in our survey, before we'd even asked respondents to reflect on their mentoring experiences, to estimate the percentage contribution that they felt mentors had made in their lives — 0 percent representing the belief that mentoring had made no difference in the outcomes of their lives and 100 percent indicating that literally everything the individual had achieved was attributable to the influence of their mentors growing up. In a very individualistic society like America, we were curious as to how meaningful the advice of childhood mentors would feel given the input of other factors, such as an individual's hard work, the support of their immediate family or spouse, or even just plain old luck.

As shown in Figure 25, we were pleasantly surprised that Americans, on average, attributed a little more than half (56 percent) of their success in life to the mentoring they had growing up. A third of all Americans give their mentors at least 75 percent of the credit! The impact of mentors seems to be most appreciated by those who had *both* programmatic and naturally occurring mentoring relationships while growing up. Almost three-quarters of those individuals give their mentors half the credit or more. Without even having a chance to reflect on the meaningful support mentors offered them, American adults overwhelmingly indicated that mentors played a huge part in who they are today. It seems, even in the land of the "rugged individualist" and pulling one's self up "by their own bootstraps," that most of us recognize the power of mentoring in relation to personal achievement and the inherent value in these caring adult relationships beyond the immediate family.

Figure 25 - Estimates of the Contribution of Mentors to Life Success

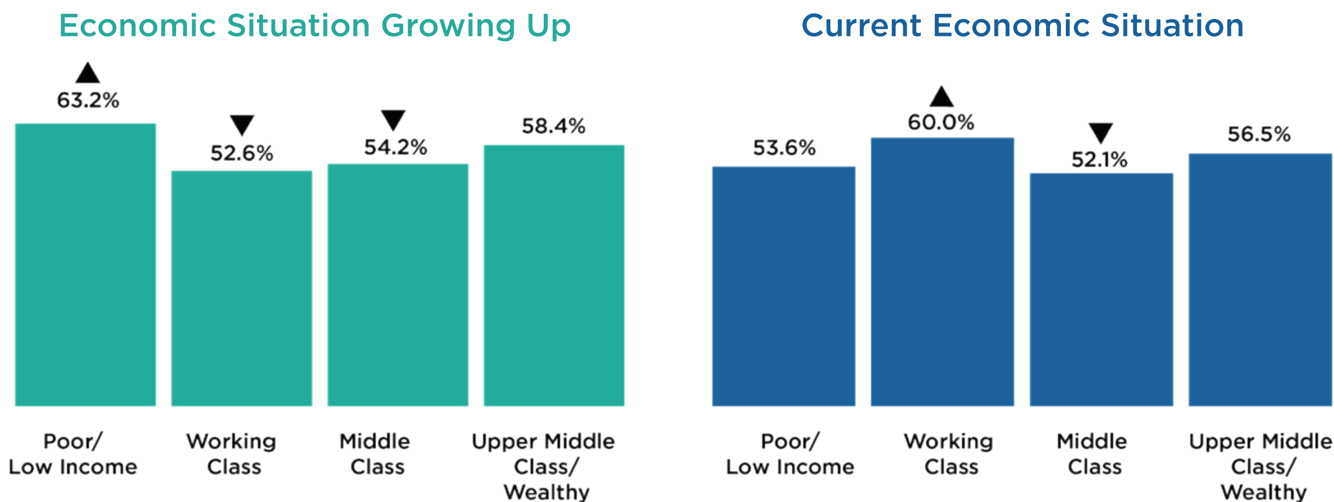


We did not find much variation, at least in terms of statistical significance, on these findings across different subgroups of respondents.

- Looking across racial/ethnic identity, we find that American Indian and Alaska Native individuals are significantly more likely to attribute their success (80 percent of it) to their mentors. This is unsurprising given the time-honored role of elders and community leaders in tribal culture. Conversely, individuals identifying as White only rated the influence of their mentors the lowest, giving those mentors a still meaningful 54 percent of the credit for their success.
- We also find that those living in households where English is not the primary spoken language place more emphasis on the role of mentors in their success (64 percent).
- When factoring in both generational cohort and racial/ethnic identity, we find that Baby Boomers who identify as BIPOC give far more credit to their mentors than do their White generational peers (64.5 percent to 51.7 percent, respectively). This trend did not appear in any other generational cohort.

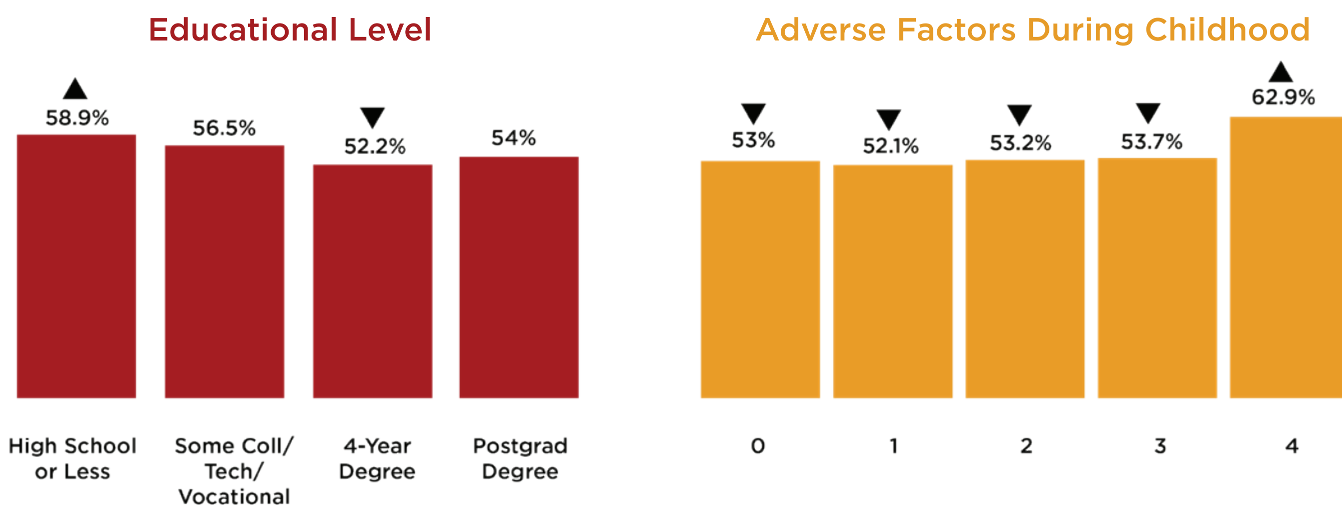
We do see some compelling findings when looking at the influence of socioeconomic factors on the perceived value of mentoring. As shown in Figure 26, those who grew up in poverty give their mentors much more credit for the success they found later in life — this is especially true in comparison to those who grew up working or middle class. When considering the socioeconomic status Americans are living in today, those who are working class as adults are significantly more likely than their middle-class peers to give credit to their childhood mentors.

Figure 26 - Perceived Impact of Mentoring on Life Success by Childhood and Adult Socioeconomic Status



We also find that some interesting correlations related to education level and with the number of adverse experiences that individuals faced during childhood. Figure 27 shows that those who have only a high school diploma or less give their mentors much more credit than those with higher levels of educational attainment. But perhaps more compellingly, we find that those who faced more than four of the serious adverse experiences and challenges growing up are significantly more likely to give their mentors a lot of credit in the success they found later in life.

Figure 27 - Perceived Impact of Mentoring on Success in Life by Educational Attainment and Adverse Factors Growing Up



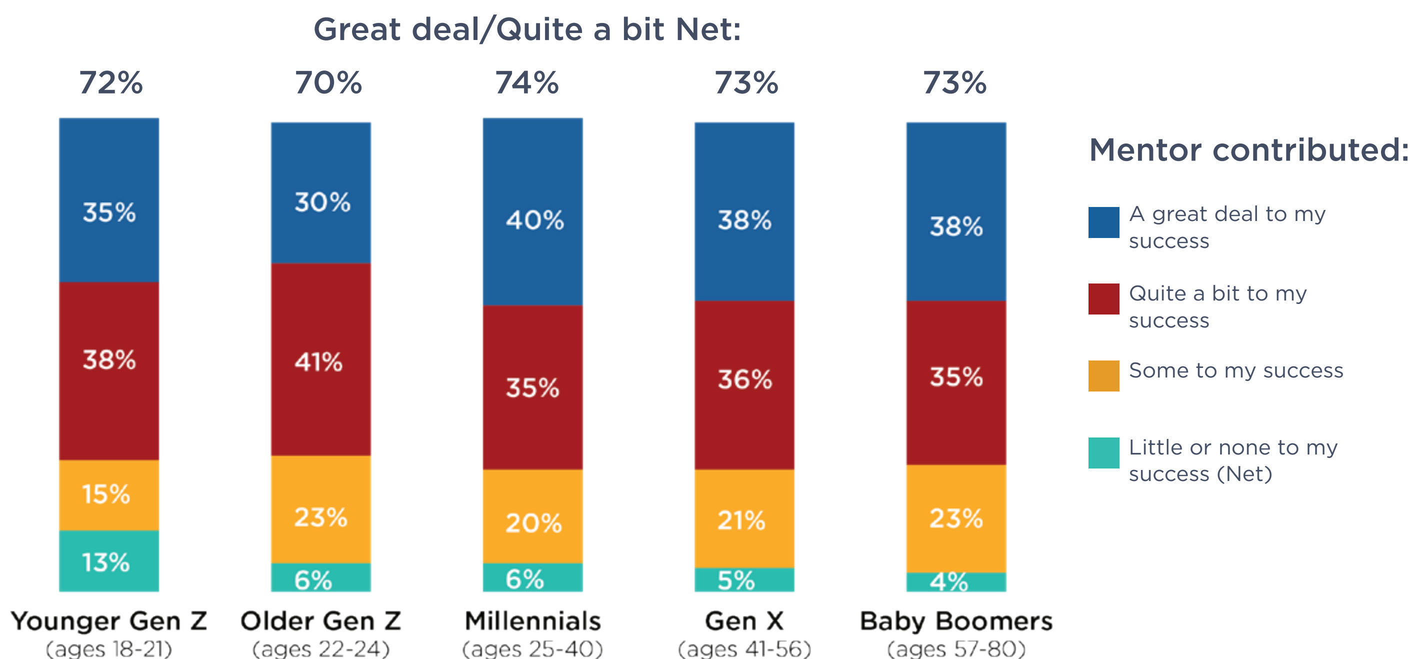
In the following section of this report (Theme 5), we dive much deeper into the approaches and impact of the adults that respondents described as their "most meaningful" mentor, but here we note that we also find even stronger correlations between these primary mentors and individuals' sense of their contributions to life success. As illustrated in Figure 28, when thinking about those most meaningful mentors, Americans of all generations attributed very high percentages of their success to these pivotal individuals. While the "quick reaction" response at the beginning of our survey was to give mentors about 50 percent of the credit for a person's success in life, when asked to reflect specifically on these primary mentors, individuals across generations were much more generous in noting that their personal success owed a lot to these meaningful figures.

Delving further within some additional demographic factors reveals that those more likely to describe the contributions of their primary mentors to their success in life as a "little" or "not at all" (net) include: individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ (16 percent vs. 4 percent Non-LGBTQ+) and Asian youth (16 percent vs. 3–7 percent other ethnicities).

Within the age 18–24 Gen Z cohort, we find these groups reporting less impactful mentoring: LGBTQ+/Black individuals (24 percent), BIPOC/Low-Income individuals (19 percent), Black/Low-Income individuals (16 percent), and BIPOC/Urban individuals (17 percent).

The reasons behind these statistically significant differences are unclear, but it is worth noting that our youngest respondents (ages 18–21) were least likely to give these meaningful mentors a lot of credit, which may be a reflection that those young adults don't feel like they accomplished enough in life to be able to give credit to *anyone*.

Figure 28 - Perceived Contribution to Success in Life by "Most Meaningful" Mentors by Generational Cohort



Mentoring and Sense of Belonging

To further understand how mentors may have supported young people while growing up, we wanted to explore the connections between mentoring and a critical component of a healthy childhood and adolescence: A sense of belonging. As noted in MENTOR's Research Agenda, a sense of belonging is a critical asset that allows a young person to feel comfortable and welcome in their community and the institutions where they spend their time. Belonging lays a foundation not only for a youth's thriving, but for seeking out additional help and support from the caring adults around them.

What we find in our results are strong correlations between mentoring and a sense of belonging, both as a young person and now in adulthood. We find that the sense of belonging that youth felt growing up is fairly consistent across the generations, with today's Gen Z cohort having the weakest feelings of belonging compared to prior generations (see Table 5).

Age Group	Very or somewhat strong sense of belonging (net)	Very weak
Younger Gen Z (ages 18–21)	**61%**	**12%**
Older Gen Z (ages 22–24)	**62%**	**14%**
Millennials (ages 25–40)	**67%**	**13%**
Gen X (ages 41–56)	**67%**	**10%**
Baby Boomers (ages 57–80+)	**68%**	**10%**

Table 5- Sense of Belonging by Generational Cohort

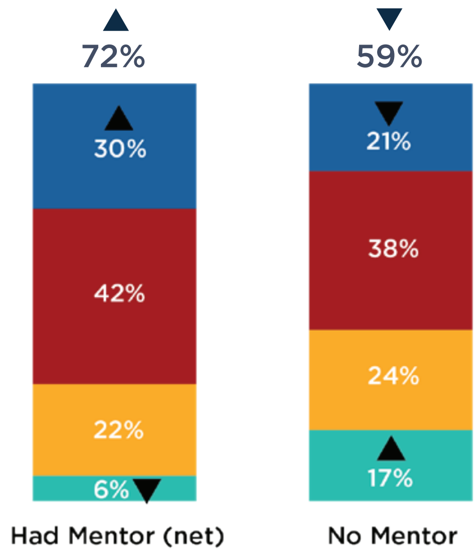
These trends in youth belonging extend into adulthood, with Baby Boomers more likely to say they have a strong or somewhat strong sense of belonging (81 percent), with a steady decline across generations down to today's 18-to-21-year-old young adults (71 percent).

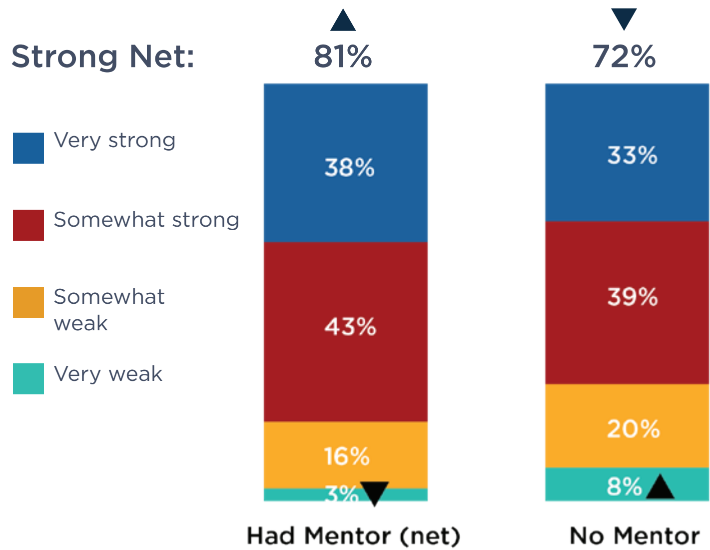
But mentors seem to make a meaningful difference on sense of belonging, both while growing up and into adulthood. We find the presence of mentors to be correlated with a stronger sense of belonging in both childhood and adulthood, as shown in Figure 29.

Figure 29 does not prove that mentors directly built a sense of belonging with their mentees. In fact, it is plausible that having a strong sense of belonging as a child may make it easier to find adult mentors and ask for their support — and those personality traits may extend into adulthood, explaining the higher rates of belonging for those who were mentored now that they are grown.

But we find some evidence that mentors made a difference in helping youth feel like they belonged in this challenging world. When asked about the things that those "most meaningful" primary mentors did to support them, the second and third highest rated forms of support were "helped me to build a sense of belonging" and "helped me understand who I am as a person" ("helped me solve problems" was the highest rated form of support, as detailed more in the next section). It seems that for youth who may be struggling to figure out their place in the world, a mentor can be a powerful asset in building connections and feelings of belonging and acceptance — a state of mind that may continue into adulthood, based on our findings here.

Figure 29 - Sense of Belonging in Childhood and Adulthood by Mentoring or No Mentoring





Mentoring and Mental Health

We see similar patterns when looking at mental health. Baby Boomers (those 57 and older) report the highest levels of mental health today (63 percent rate it as very good or excellent), with today's young adults (18–21) reporting much poorer mental health (only 43 percent say theirs is very good or excellent). While we did not ask respondents about their experiences with mental health challenges when they were younger, we did ask them what types of challenges their mentors helped them with. When looking at forms of support from those "most meaningful" mentors, we find that the younger generations are much more likely to have received mental health support from their mentors than older generations, as shown in Table 6.

Clearly, supporting mental health is a much larger part of mentoring relationships today than it was 30 or 40 years ago. And, as with belonging, we have some hints that mentors are able to provide meaningful support on this topic in Figure 30, which shows that those who had a mentor growing up report higher perceptions of their mental health than those who did not have a mentor.

Age Group	Mentor supported youth around mental health challenges
Younger Gen Z (ages 18–21)	**58%**
Older Gen Z (ages 22–24)	**61%**
Millennials (ages 25–40)	**42%**
Gen X (ages 41–56)	**33%**
Baby Boomers (ages 57–80+)	**17%**

Table 6 - Rates of Mentor Support of Mental Health Needs by Generational Cohort

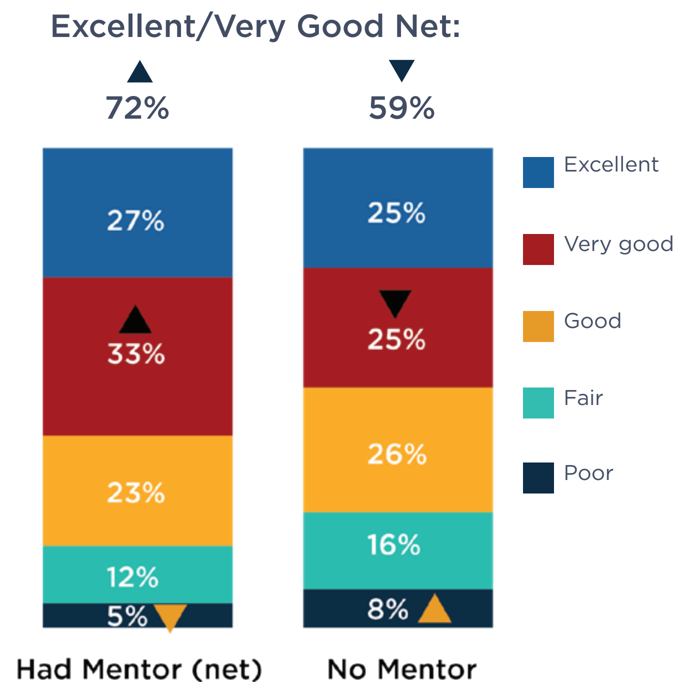
As with sense of belonging, we don't have causal proof here that these mentoring relationships directly led to these mental health findings in adulthood. It's entirely possible that these individuals always had good mental health and that it was easier to find mentors as a result. But given the growing prominence of mental health as a topic that mentors directly address in these relationships, it does seem that having a mentor during childhood can bolster mental health, a finding corroborated by other studies and meta-analyses on mentoring (for example, see Herrera, DuBois, & Grossman, 2013,[7] Meyerson, 2013,[8] and Munson & Railey, 2016[9] for more research evidence about how mentors can support mental health needs).

Mentoring and Positive Achievements Growing Up

We also wanted to see if this study could provide further information about the role that mentors may have played in young people achieving markers of success while growing up. One of the most interesting findings in the *Mentoring Effect* was that mentored youth, in particular those who had experienced some challenges and adverse situations growing up, were much more likely to achieve some meaningful goals than their unmentored counterparts:

- Twenty percentage points more likely to plan for or enroll in college.
- Thirty points more likely to participate in sports or extracurriculars.
- Twenty-one points more likely to volunteer in their community.
- More than twice as likely to hold a leadership position in a school, club, sports team, or other group.

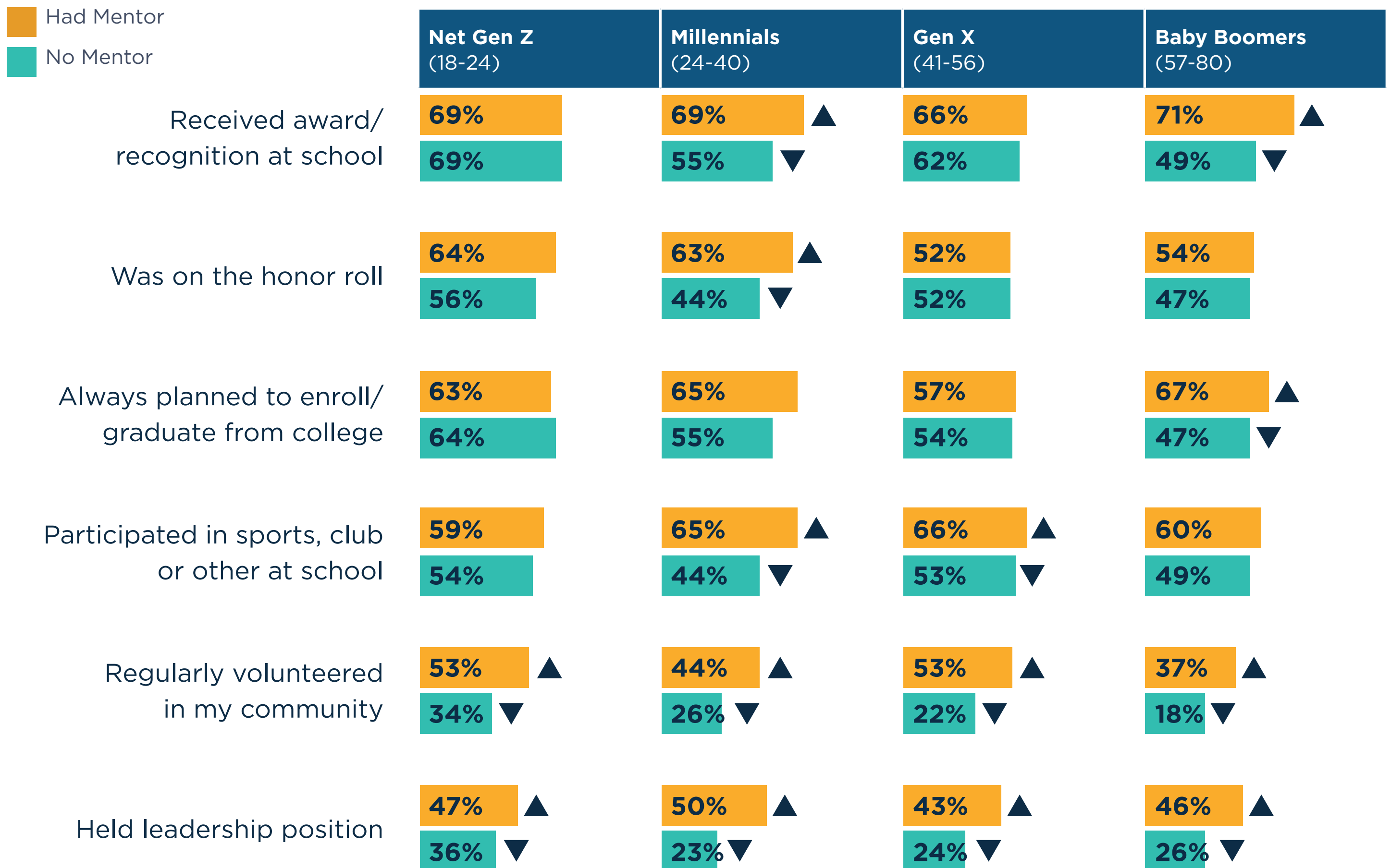
Figure 30 - Current Assessment of Mental Health by Having a Mentor or No Mentor Growing Up



We find a similar pattern of achievement for today's young people, although at a slightly lower level of impact than we found in the study from a decade ago. Figure 31 illustrates positive experiences and achievements and the percentage of mentored and unmentored youth who achieved them.

> *"My boss saw something in me that I never knew I had and he helped me to discover the drive and skills I didn't even know I had or have the confidence to do so. To this day, I'm grateful for everything he's taught me."*
>
> *—Survey respondent, age 22 (Gen Z)*

Figure 31 – Comparison of Rates of Positive Achievements by Mentoring Experience and Generational Cohort



As we can see in Figure 31, mentored youth across the generations (gold bars) are consistently more likely to have certain positive experiences than their unmentored peers (green bars), with these differences often being statistically significant (up and down arrows) and in some cases by several orders of magnitude. It is worth noting, however, that as was pointed out in Theme 1, those with mentors tend to come from wealthier homes and have more resources and opportunities at their disposal. But generally, looking across the generations, we see strong correlations between having a mentor and higher rates of these accomplishments.

Unfortunately for Gen Z, these correlations only hold true for two positive experiences: volunteering in the community and holding a leadership position, two achievements that likely also correlate with socioeconomic status and other factors in the home. Directly comparing youth from the *Mentoring Effect* study who had experienced at least one negative circumstance growing up to the same Gen Z cohort in our new sample, we find that today's young people truly are reporting fewer associations between mentoring and these markers of positive achievement

It is important to note that these achievements and positive activities are more prevalent for the mentored groups in both studies. But, generally, we don't see quite the dramatic correlations with achievement and mentoring that we did a decade ago. There are likely many factors at play in this shift, but one worth noting here was mentioned in the findings on Theme 1: today's mentoring programs are much more likely to be serving youth with numerous serious needs. Today's Gen Z young adult with four or more adverse life challenges is twice as likely to have had a program mentor than members of Gen Z with no challenges. Furthermore, 36 percent of Gen Z youth with four or more life challenges have received mentoring through a program — for similar Gen X youth 30 years ago, that number was 21 percent, once again suggesting that we have strongly shifted mentoring services to those with more needs for whom "success" might look differently than it does for their less-traumatized peers.

It's likely that youth today are getting as much, if not more, out of mentoring experiences than they ever have. But the youth who are getting it have more serious needs and they likely start out further away from some of these achievements than they did in prior generations.

	This study's young Gen Z respondents with at least one life challenge (ages 18–24)		The *Mentoring Effect* youth with at least one life challenge (then ages 18–21, now ages 27–30)	
	Mentored	**Not Mentored**	**Mentored**	**Not Mentored**
I always planned to enroll in and graduate from college.	**62%**	**56%**	**76%**	**56%**
I regularly participated in a sports team, club, or other extracurricular activity at my school.	**58%**	**49%**	**67%**	**37%**
I held a leadership position in a club, sports team, school council, or other group.	**46%**	**32%**	**51%**	**22%**
I regularly volunteered in my community.	**52%**	**35%**	**48%**	**27%**

Table 7 - Positive Achievements of Today's Gen Z Youth with at Least One Life Challenge to Similar Youth from the Mentoring Effect Survey

"She helped me through some of the hardest times in my life. She talked to me and listened and helped me come to conclusions that I needed to come to. I don't think I could've made it this far without her." *—Survey respondent, age 19 (Gen Z)*

Mentoring and Economic Mobility

Lastly, we wanted to see if there was any evidence in these data that might speak to whether mentoring had supported the economic mobility of individuals. In the survey we asked respondents to tell us the socioeconomic status of the home they grew up in, as well as the socioeconomic status of their household today using the following categories: poor/low income, working class, middle class, upper middle class, and wealthy. This allowed us to see which individuals, in their opinion, had moved up or down the socioeconomic ladder over the course of their life.

It is worth noting here that there were no significant differences across our full sample in the rates of mentoring for those who went up the socioeconomic ladder, those who went down, or those who stayed the same from childhood into adulthood, as shown in Figure 32. Viewed from this perspective, mentoring seemed to have no influence on economic mobility.

But much of the emphasis on economic mobility in America is concentrated on those at the lower end of our economy — after all, few are as interested in the jumps from upper middle class to extreme wealth or from the middle class to the upper middle class when so many Americans are living in deep multi-generational poverty and are desperately looking for a way to improve the fortunes of their children and grandchildren. Thus, we further examined these associations by limiting our analysis to those who grew up in poor, low-income, and working-class households, *and who had experienced upward mobility during their lives.* We also limited our analysis to those 40 years old or younger, reflecting that the levers of economic mobility have shifted considerably in recent decades and we wanted to focus on more recent impacts of mentoring. These were individuals who had had started low on the socioeconomic ladder, but had climbed up at least one step, and we wanted to see if mentoring was correlated with that climb.

As shown in Figure 33, the answer was a clear yes. Those who had started out life working class or lower but had improved their economic status into adulthood had higher rates of mentoring (72 percent) than their generational peers overall (66 percent) and their peers who did not improve their socioeconomic status (59 percent). They also had higher rates of both programmatic mentoring (29 to 25 percent) and naturally occurring mentoring (59 to 53 percent) than their 18-to-40-year old peers generally.

Figure 32 - Rates of Mentoring by Changes in Socioeconomic Status Between Childhood and Adulthood

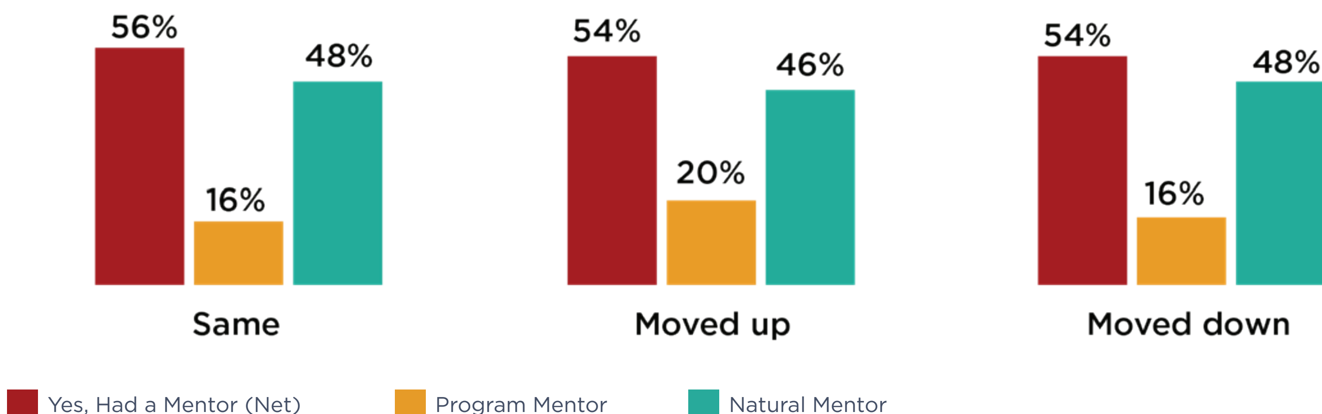
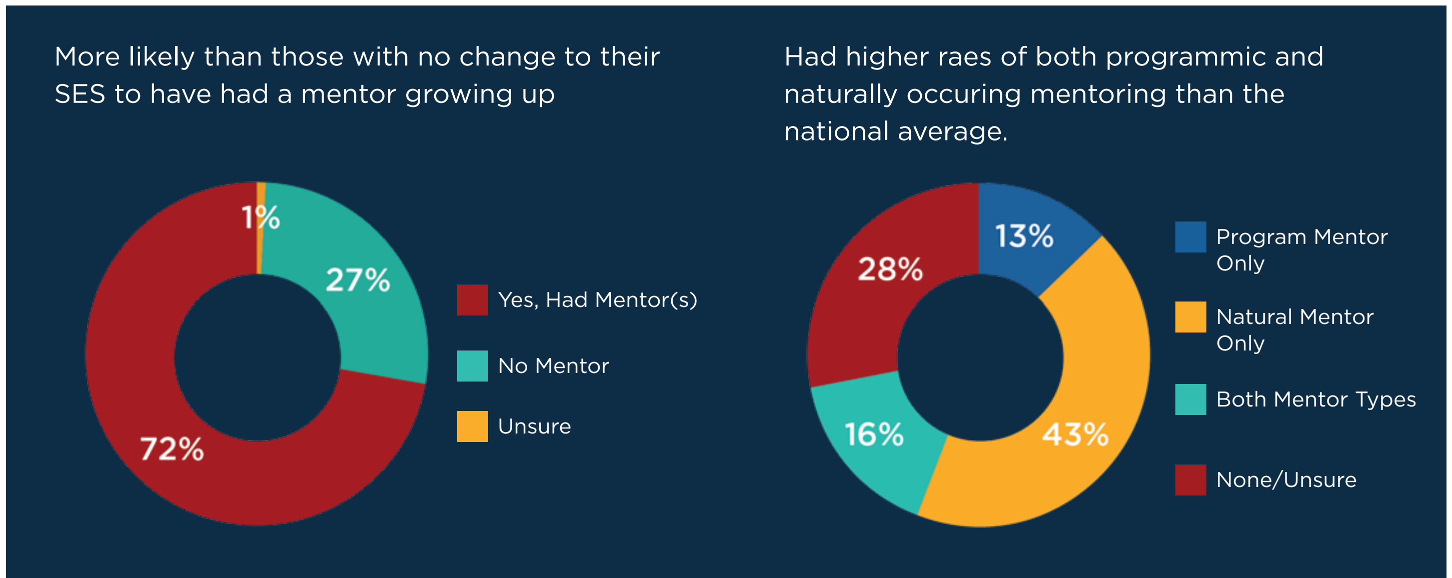


Figure 33 - Rates and Types of Mentoring Relationships for Lower-Income Individuals Experiencing Upward Mobility (Ages 18–40 only)



It is incredibly important to note here that these findings are not causal proof that mentoring directly led to this upward mobility. In fact, our analyses show that this cohort differs significantly from their peers who did not make socioeconomic gains in adulthood: these individuals are more likely to be female, married, college graduates, and employed full time. They have a significantly higher than average household income ($74K/year), and nearly 3 in 10 have a household income of $100K/year or more. While all of them grew up either poor/low income or working class, over half (56 percent) are now in the middle class and one in six (17 percent) are upper middle class/wealthy. As a group they exhibit stronger mental or emotional well-being compared to their counterparts.

But we also find that there are no stand-out significant differences between this group and their counterparts in terms of experiences growing up, and they averaged the same number of adverse life challenges. This indicates that these individuals didn't start from a better place than their economically stagnant peers, but they, for a variety of reasons, have found more success financially in their adulthood — and they certainly had a lot of mentoring support, both in terms of natural mentors and programmatic ones, along the way.

> *"When I was 17 years old, I was diagnosed with a long list of health issues primarily caused by anorexia. During this time, I completely withdrew from school and my life. My English teacher and school counselor were very helpful. They were able to vouch for me to other teachers and provide was for me to catch up on missed work. Without those two, I would have gone from a 4.3 GPA student to a high school dropout in six months." —Survey respondent, age 18 (Gen Z)*

In summary, this theme highlights just how important the asset of a caring mentoring relationship can be. We see consistent correlations over many generations between the presence of mentors in youths' lives and their achievements and sense of having led a successful life. We even see some hints that having a mentor can bolster a youth's sense of belonging, strengthen their mental health, and perhaps even provide opportunities for economic mobility. But more than anything, we see Americans of all ages giving their mentors tremendous amounts of credit and thanks for the impact that mentors made on their lives. Those who needed this help the most because life was difficult growing up seem to express the deepest gratitude for the mentoring they experienced. Not every American's life will be a stunning success story; not everyone's dreams come true and bad luck and hard times can befall any of us. But regardless of how life turned out, Americans here tell a story of deep gratitude for the support of their mentors and the positive changes in life trajectory that they attribute to the love and guidance of those mentors. There is no greater praise for a mentor than to hear a person say "I wouldn't be the person I am today without their help." And in this study, we find a chorus of American voices singing the praises of their mentors for a job well done.

In the final section in this report (Theme 5), we focus even more on who these key mentors were and how exactly they supported their mentees in their relationships.

Theme 5

Americans' "most meaningful" mentors supported them in a variety of ways.

This final theme centers around what we wound up calling "most meaningful" mentors for the individuals we surveyed. While, as noted earlier in this report, Americans reported having many mentors in their life growing up (see Figure 11, page 20), for most of us, there is usually one mentor who stood out among all the rest, the one that we first think of when we think about the support of a caring adult, the one who we most thank for helping us along the journey to adulthood. We wanted to learn more about who these uniquely special people were and how exactly they made such a difference for the young people whose lives they touched.

Who Are These Most Meaningful Mentors?

Most meaningful mentors tend to be a blend of naturally occurring and program-provided mentors, with our respondents nominating a mentor they found naturally about three times more than they nominated a programmatic one (Figure 34). However, for individuals who had both types of mentors, they were equally as likely to nominate a programmatic mentor as their most meaningful, suggesting that when those relationships "click," they can be as powerful as any other type of mentoring experience.

We also find differences between these types of mentors by youth age range. Program mentors seem to be equally important across age ranges, especially between ages 12 and 21. Mentoring relationships that develop naturally, however, appear to be most critical from ages 16 to 21, as illustrated in Figure 35.

Figure 34 - Composition of Most Meaningful Mentors by

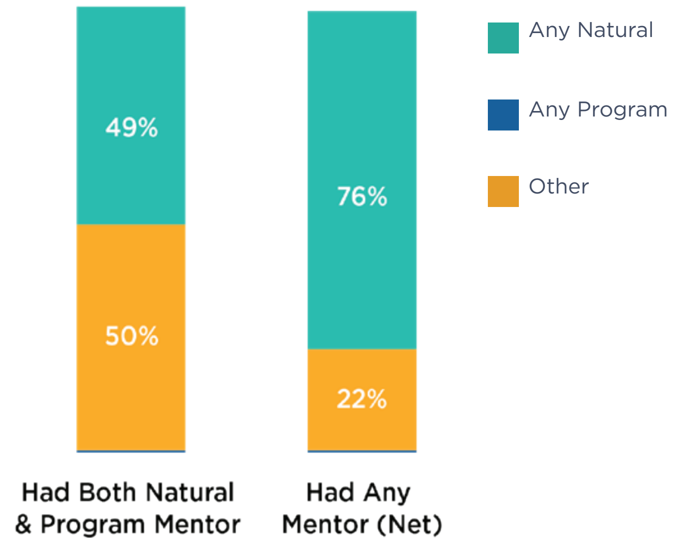
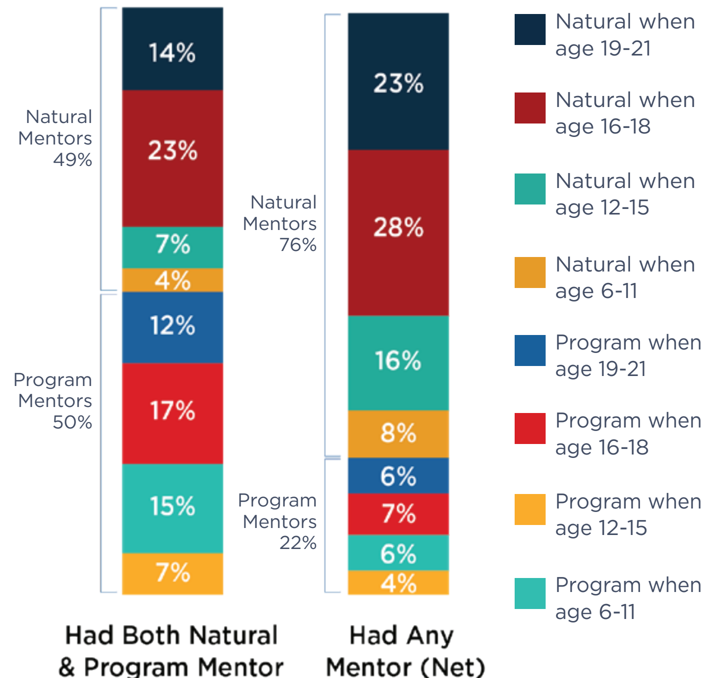


Figure 35 - Naturally Occurring and Programmatic Mentors by Youth Age



Locations for Finding Mentors During Childhood and Adolescence

We also find incredible diversity in where youth find mentors as they grow up. Starting with program-provided mentors, we find that school and after-school settings are the most prominent places where youth connected with programmatic mentors across all ages, followed by religious institutions and local community centers and similar settings. As would be expected, it's not until the high school and young adult years that virtual program mentors become prominent. Figure 36 details these places of connection (note that the chart below covers all programmatic mentoring relationships mentioned in our survey, not just the "most meaningful" one, although for most individuals, their most meaningful mentor was likely their sole mentor at any given time).

It is interesting to note the prominence of school as a primary location for programmatic mentoring in the youngest and eldest age ranges here. This suggests that younger children are much more likely to have mentors provided through a school-based program. The preponderance of mentors in the post–high school years suggests that higher education institutions are prominent places of connection to programmatic mentors in the young adult years — it is increasingly common, for example, for colleges to offer mentoring to incoming freshmen cohorts to help ease their transition onto campus.

When looking at naturally occurring mentoring relationships, we see considerable diversity in where these connections were made. Once again, Figure 37 includes all naturally found mentors, not just "most meaningful" ones, although in many cases those are synonymous. Here we see that teachers, friends of the family, and extended family members are the most prominent sources of naturally occurring mentoring relationships, with counselors and faith groups growing in importance in the middle and high school years, and coworkers quickly rising in prominence in the post–high school years.

Figure 36 - Places of Connection with Program-Provided Mentors by Youth Age Range

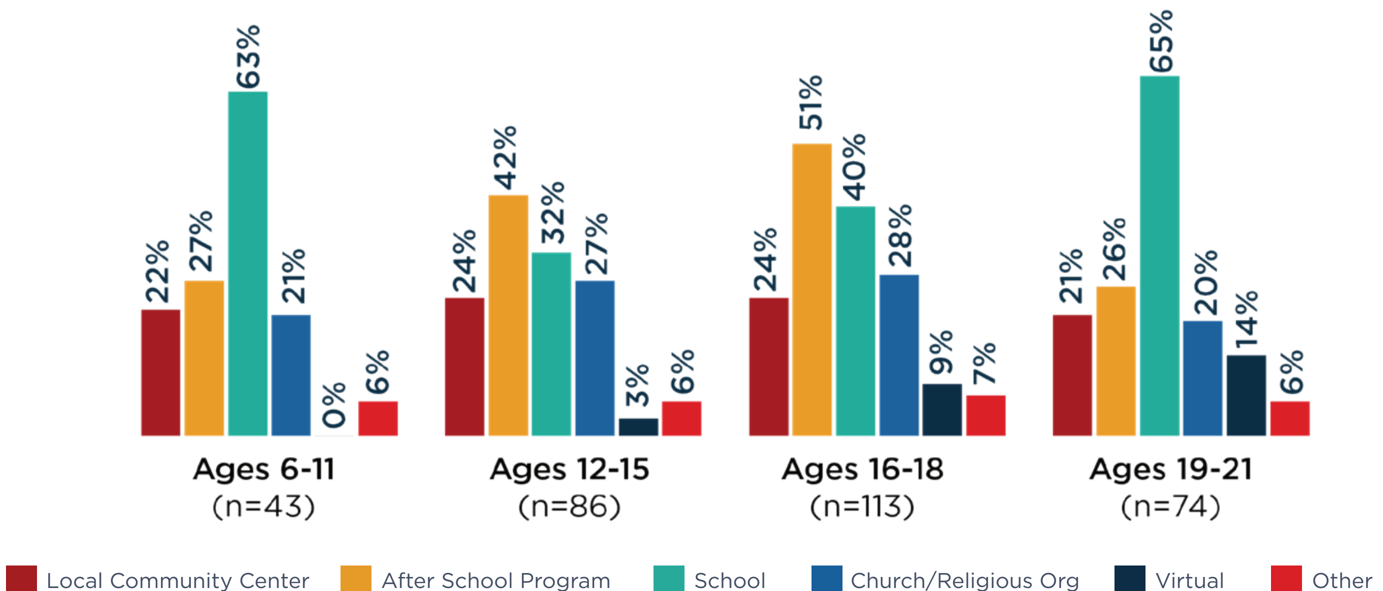
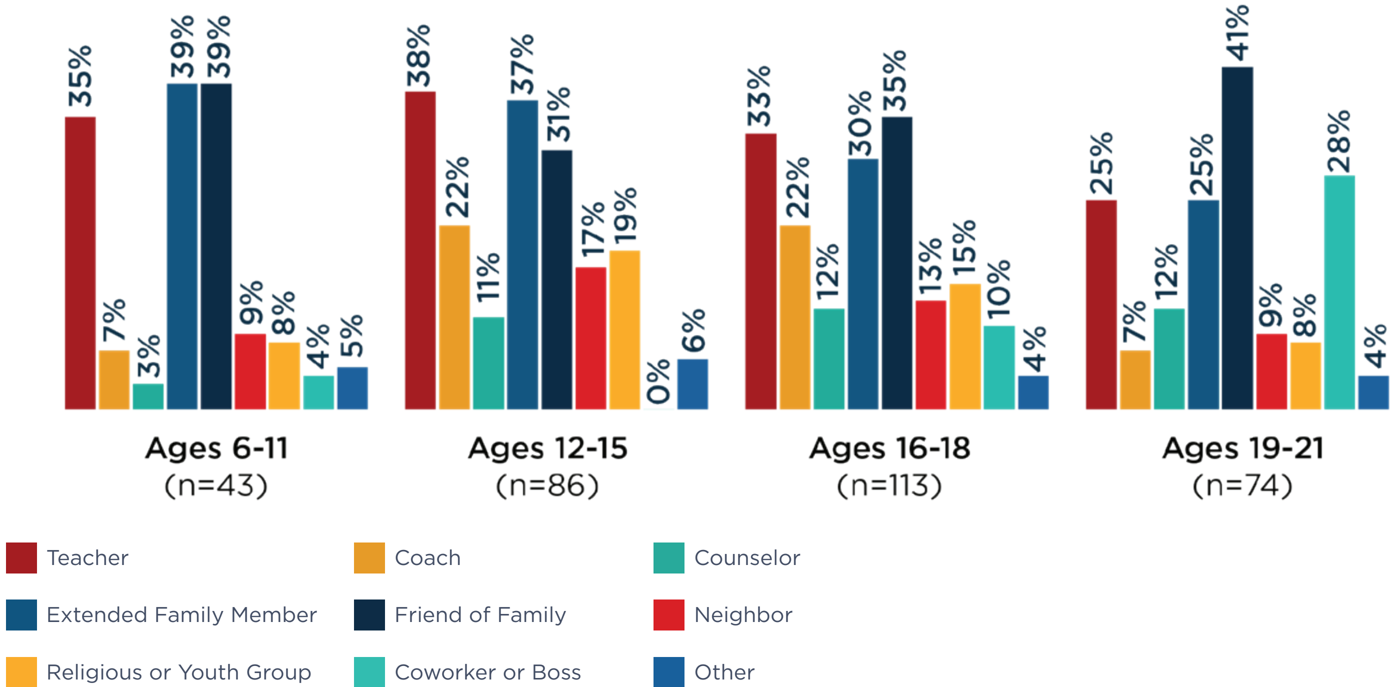


Figure 37 - Sources of Naturally Occurring Mentors by Youth Age Range



Other Characteristics of Most Meaningful Mentoring Relationships

The figures below highlight some other interesting characteristics of these most meaningful mentoring relationships, including how they started, whether youth were offered a choice or had their preferences honored when being matched with a mentor (program only), and how long these relationships lasted.

Figure 38 - Initiation of Mentoring Relationship with Most Meaningful Mentor

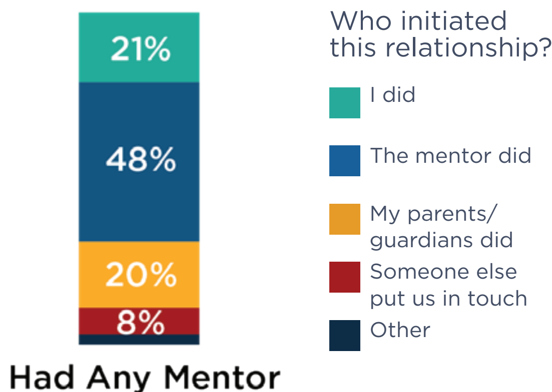
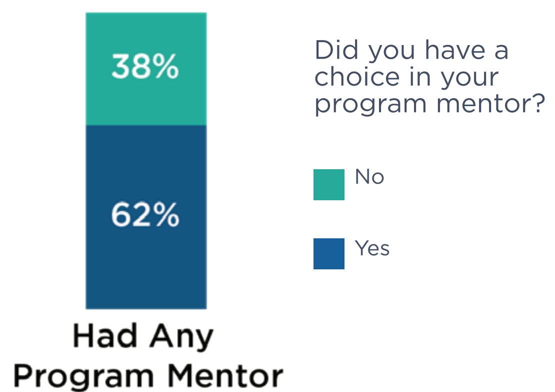


Figure 39 - Youth Given Choices When Paired with a Program Mentor

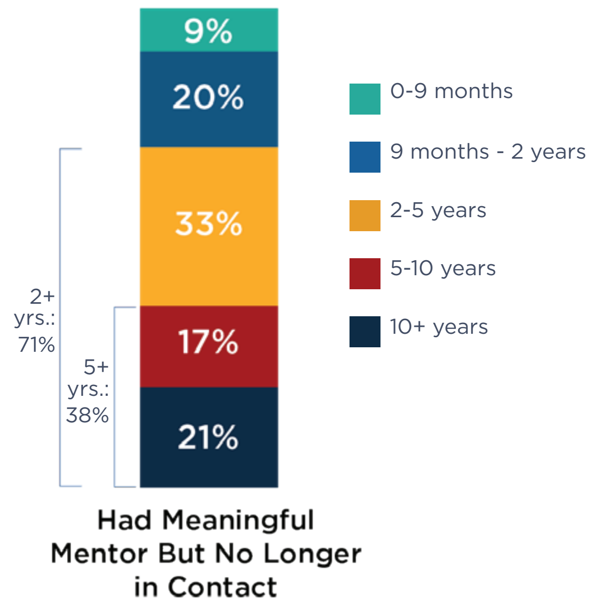


A few words of explanation about Figure 40: We limited our analysis here only to respondents who were no longer in contact with their mentors so that we could understand the full duration of their relationships. As would be expected, the older the respondent, the more likely they are to fall into the longer-term relationships with their mentors. The percentages of those having a relationship lasting two years or more across generational cohorts reflects this clearly:

- Younger Gen Z: 34 percent
- Older Gen Z: 56 percent
- Millennials: 58 percent
- Gen X: 71 percent
- Baby Boomers: 81 percent

Overall, half of our respondents indicated they were still in touch with their most meaningful mentors, with Baby Boomer respondents (those 57 and older) being far less likely to say they were still getting advice from these key figures, most likely due to their mentors having passed on. We found that those in the higher income brackets were more likely to still be in touch with their meaningful mentors. We also found those who had three or more adverse life challenges to be more likely to still be in contact, suggesting those who needed their mentors the most in their younger years have found many reasons to keep drawing on their support over time.

Figure 40 - Length of Most Meaningful Mentoring Relationship (those no longer in contact)



Ways in Which Most Meaningful Mentors Supported Youth

We asked respondents to indicate the actions their mentors took and the ways in which they offered support during their relationship. As illustrated in Figure 41, these meaningful mentors offered their support in a number of ways, with the following approaches being most common: 1) accepting them for who they are, 2) listening carefully, 3) trusting them, 4) being patient, and 5) taking them seriously.

We also find some distinct differences when comparing naturally occurring mentoring relationships and those provided through a program along these dimensions. As illustrated in Figure 42, for nearly a dozen mentor actions, those whose most meaningful mentor was a naturally found mentor are more likely to say certain statements are "very true" about their most meaningful relationship. When looking at the largest discrepancies, mentors who came from naturally occurring sources were more highly rated than their program counterparts in the areas of:

- Stuck with them through challenges (+23 percent).
- Showed an interest in what they did together (+23 percent).
- Understood their problems (+18 percent).
- Laughed and joked with them (+17 percent).
- Trusted them (+15 percent).

Figure 41 - Actions and Approaches of Most Meaningful Mentors

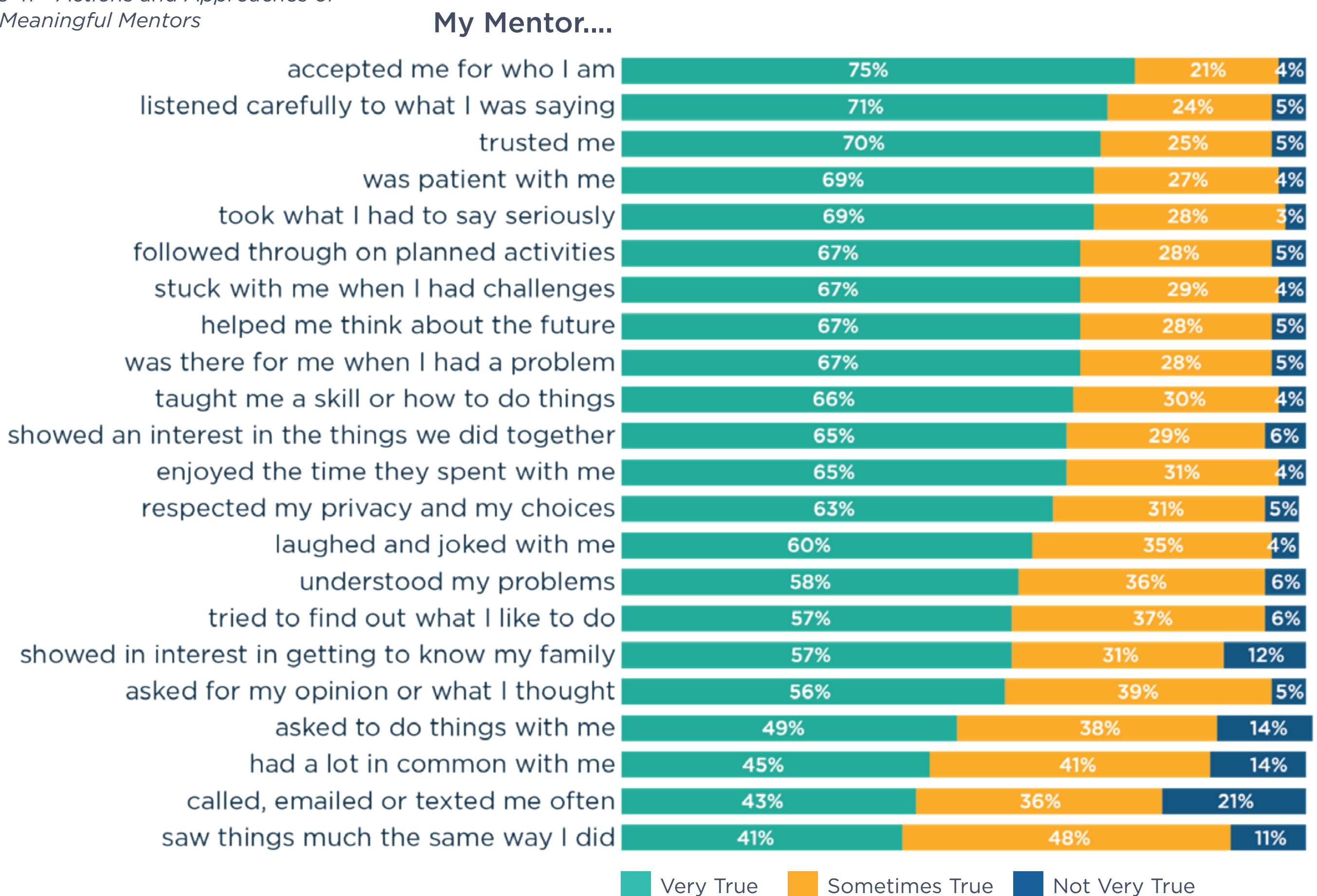
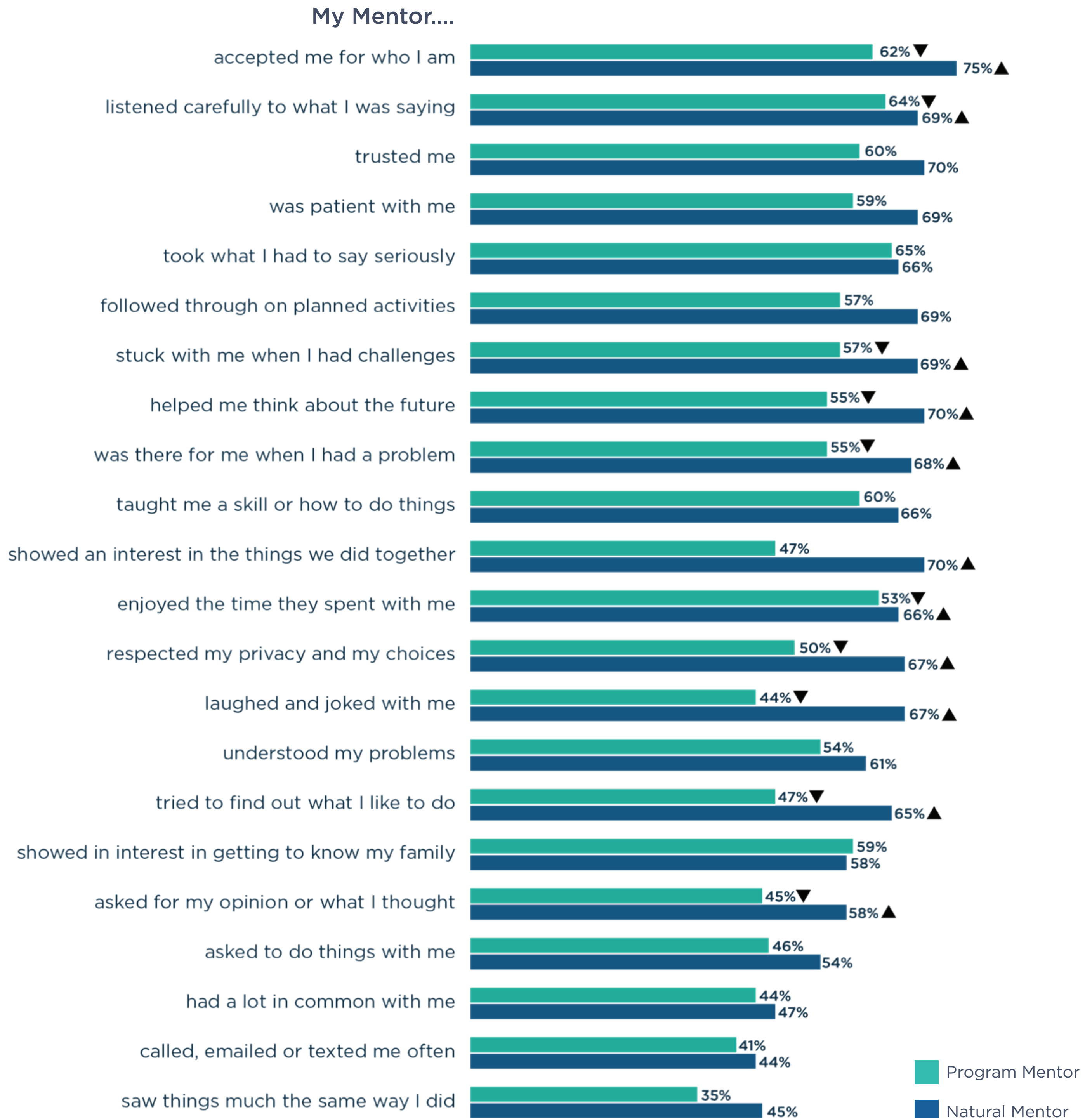


Figure 42 - Comparison of Programmatic and Naturally Sourced Mentor Approaches



These figures offer tremendous insight into the ways in which the best mentors go about building relationships with young people. We see a blend of strategies that involve getting to know the young person and their family, accepting the young person for who they are, and the importance of exhibiting patience, having fun, and following through so that trust can be formed. Interestingly, the lowest rated mentor traits are seeing things the way the young person did and having a lot in common, suggesting that there is value in mentors who challenge young people's thinking and offer new perspectives. This is not to say that there aren't benefits from having mentors with similar backgrounds and life experiences as their mentees, but clearly these most meaningful mentors didn't always have a lot in common with these youth and they often shared perspectives on issues that helped mentees consider alternatives.

We also asked Americans about the *types of help* they received from these most meaningful mentors. This differs from mentor approaches (simply what they did) because it examines the help that young people felt they personally received: A mentor could be doing all kinds of things, but they might not be perceived as beneficial at all by the young person.

Figure 43 shows the ways in which youth felt supported by their mentors, with boxes highlighting the top and bottom clusters of responses.

Unlike the actions of mentors, we did not see *any* statistically significant differences between the perceived helpfulness of naturally occurring and programmatically provided mentors. Generally, Americans rated both types of mentors as these forms of support in equal amounts.

While Figure 43 examines whether youth experienced these forms of support, we also wanted to know where their support was most valuable. Thus, Figure 44 shows the same forms of support, but ranked by *how meaningful youth found that support.*

Figure 43 - Support Received from Most Meaningful Mentors

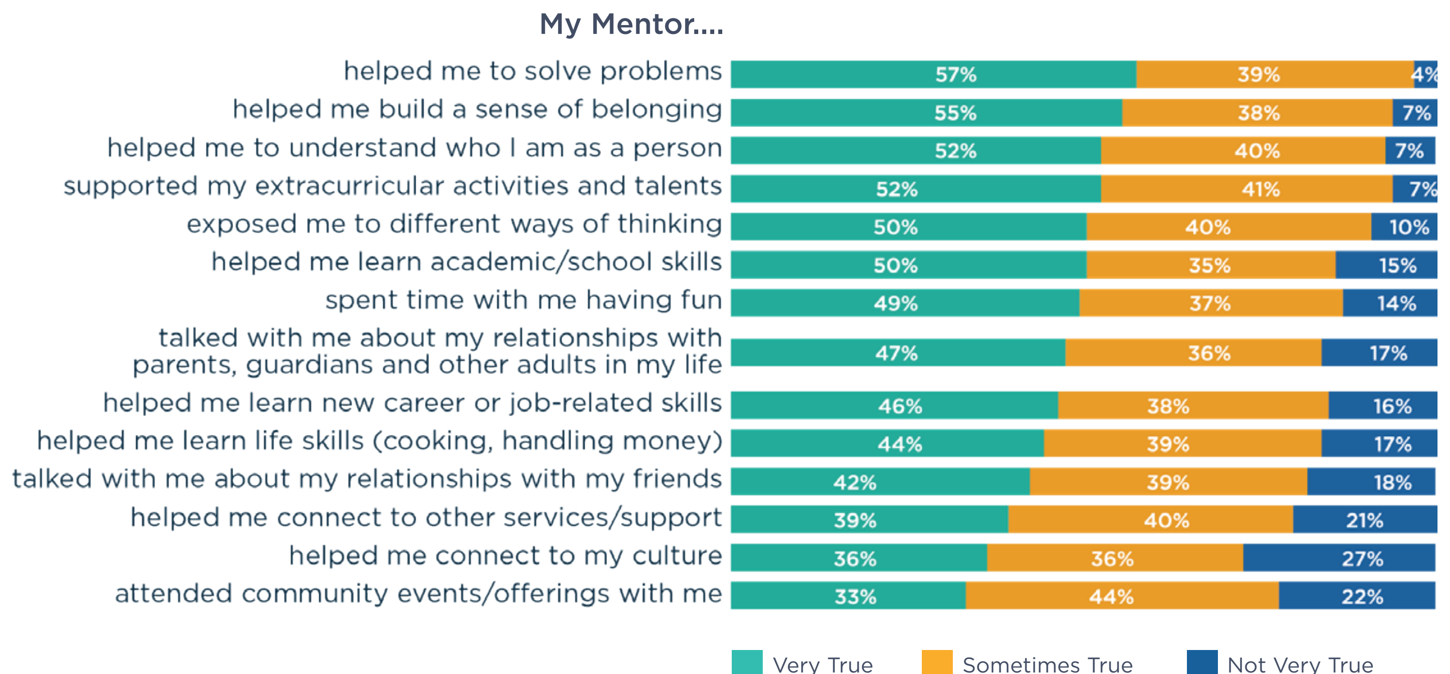


Figure 44 - Support Received from Most Meaningful Mentors

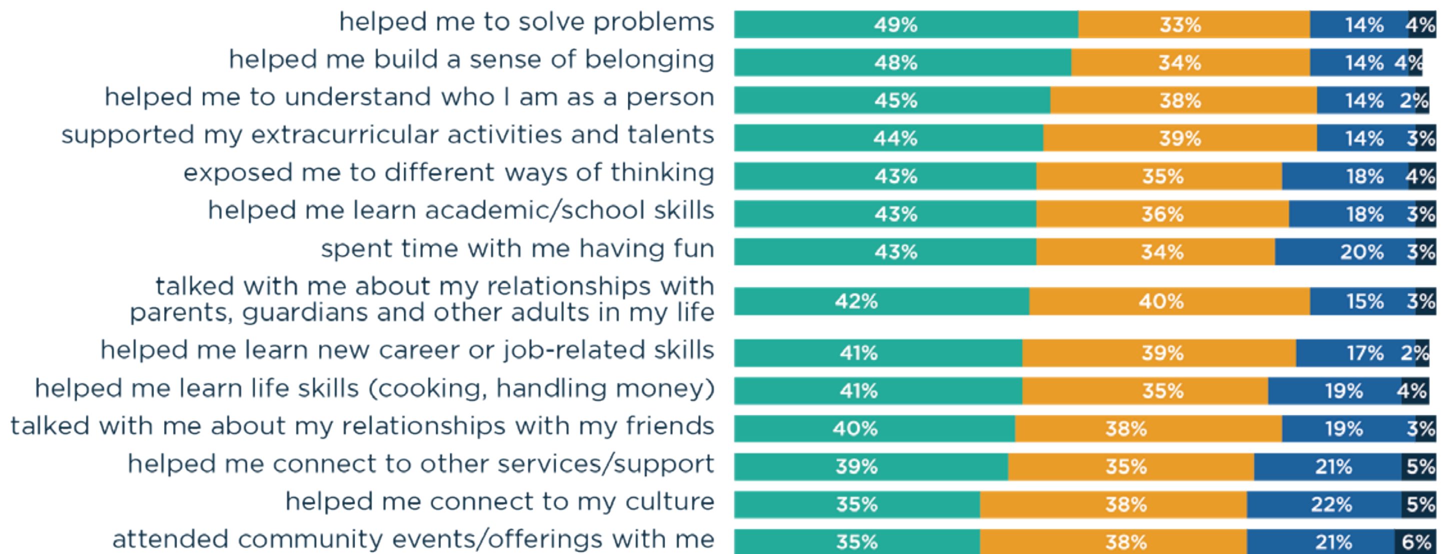


Figure 44 represents the purest perspective on the types of support young people found most valuable to their lives and it's fascinating for a variety of reasons. First, it highlights, as we covered in Theme 4, the importance of mentors helping youth form a sense of belonging. The knowledge that there is a place for one's self in a complicated and often alienating world is an amazing gift to give a young person — the fact that it was provided by someone other than these young people's primary caregivers speaks to the incredible power of mentors and these relationships.

Second, we highlight the role of fun and play in this work. For all the desire to use mentoring to address serious societal challenges — lack of economic mobility, educational deficits, abuse and trauma, systemic racism — it is important to remember that a huge part of what makes these relationships tick is fun. Just two individuals laughing and sharing and being in community with one another. As we increasingly use mentoring to cure what ails us at the individual and societal levels, these findings remind us that these relationships should be enjoyable and fun. Americans of all ages have stressed here that the fun part, the joy, is essential to making these relationships influential and impactful. It's not a side note; it's the gateway to youth feeling supported and being their best selves.

Lastly, we see that most mentors do more than one or two things to support a young person. Most respondents in our survey indicated many forms of support, many pathways to meaningful relationships. While no one mentor will bring all the skills, abilities, and opportunities a young person needs, these findings are a reminder that they can't be one-trick ponies either. They need to have a toolbox full of different approaches, talents, and mindsets. Which is why MENTOR also prioritizes the skill development of the nation's caring adults as part of our work to help youth find mentors where they are — "stocking the pond," so to speak, with adults who have mentoring skills for when youth seek out that support.

The findings in this section highlight the many ways in which mentors make a difference for young people and the places where youth find these special individuals. We are struck here by the diversity of settings and roles that these "most meaningful" mentors inhabited. These meaningful mentors came from all walks of life, in every setting where adults and youth come together. They weren't always a programmatic volunteer, nor were they simply aunties and uncles. They were coworkers, teacher aides, neighbors, faith leaders, bus drivers, barbers, and elders. This means that all adults must be prepared and must approach their interactions with youth with a mentoring mindset, so that when young people reach out for support, the adults around them have the right temperament, abilities, and approaches to meet them where they are and help them mold the story of the rest of their lives. The mentoring movement is for everyone, provided they can offer a young person some love and a few of the meaningful actions discussed here (while also having some fun along the way).

The findings presented here offer the mentoring movement a lot of food for thought. On one hand, we can take tremendous pride in the fact that we have grown mentoring relationships in the country over the last several generations. That didn't happen by accident — it happened because millions of Americans decided to get more involved in the lives of young people. This movement happened in our workplaces, in our educational institutions, in our neighborhoods. There are probably millions of American adults who are a mentor to a young person *right now* and may not even realize it. They are simply doing the work of offering a young person in their life love, attention, guidance, and grace. And, person by person, we have grown this movement and brought more and better mentoring to millions of young people.

But we also see challenges and deeper calls to action in these findings. We see that today's young people are struggling — with their mental health, with their sense of belonging, with an uncertain future — in ways that previous generations simply did not. We also see, for the first time in 30-plus years, that the prevalence of mentoring in young people's lives is starting to wane. At best, we are holding steady on where the movement was a decade ago. But given all the challenges of the last several years, holding steady is not enough. We have a renewed call to action and a renewed sense of purpose as a mentoring movement. Now is not the time to rest.

Next we offer some paths forward for our movement. None of these will be easy or quick solutions, but with enough investment and enough dedication from America's adults, we believe these paths forward will help us continue to grow the quality and accessibility of mentoring relationships for all America's young people.

1. Our movement needs all hands-on-deck to offer greater support to today's youth and young adults.

For those 24 and under today, their formative years have been largely defined by tremendous economic, political, and cultural stress. The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated inequalities that were already widening and further divided a nation that was already polarized and facing numerous challenges. As a result, their mental health and sense of belonging has suffered significantly, and they report far less support from caring adults than their peers who are just a few years older.

Addressing this moment of crisis will take considerable public and private investment, both in mentoring, but also in other aspects of American society that will stabilize the lives of adults so that they can better meet the needs of young people. Greater economic stability for the average American household will do wonders to free up Americans' schedules to devote more time and energy to mentoring, whether they do that through a program, some other institution, or simply with the kids on their block.

We must also build awareness of access to mentoring that eliminates some of the barriers discussed in this report. Giving parents and other caregivers an awareness of the benefits of mentoring and how to maximize the natural relationships already around them, especially in places that are still lacking in programmatic options, such as rural America, would greatly help. Offering training or courses to young people about how to seek out mentors and ask for their support would also pave the way for more naturally occurring relationships. There is much we can do to build enthusiasm, access, and engagement individual by individual.

2. We must foster a "mentoring mindset" in as many American adults as possible.

As shown in the findings here, schools are already a major hub for mentoring relationships, both through structured programs and in the natural connections teachers and other educators make with students every year. We can further strengthen the mentoring role of schools by supporting them to become more relationship-centered, facilitating youth-adult connections in and out of school walls and viewing mentoring as a core component of learning and holistic student development.

We can do similar work with American corporations and businesses, teaching employers of all types to offer robust mentoring experiences to youth while they are in the K–12 schools and as young adults entering the workforce. Every supervisor and employee who works alongside a young person in a workplace can be a potential mentor with the right training and a mindset that understands the value of helping young workers find their path. Focused efforts here might help improve the contribution of mentoring to upward socioeconomic mobility. Increased mentoring investment also represents a win for employers, as they benefit from the improved talent pipelines, happier and more skilled workers, and increased staff diversity that helps a business thrive.

This "mentoring mindset" can extend to many other American systems and industries — including health, higher education, child welfare, justice, and immigration. All sectors of American life should reflect on how they can bring more mentoring to the work they do and the places where they interact with young people. This is not just a calling of the volunteer or nonprofit sectors. This movement must include all layers and structures of America society.

3. Supporting youth belonging and identity should increasingly be emphasized in mentoring relationships.

In this report we learned quite a bit about the ways that mentors built strong relationships with young people and the forms of support that those youth felt was most meaningful. Building nurturing feelings of belonging rose to the very top of the list of ways that mentors *across four generations* were helpful. Those special mentors helped youth see who they were and how they could find their place in the world. They provided a harbor in the storm. Mentors also supported identity development, with hundreds upon hundreds of individuals in our survey writing about discovering who they are, learning to be their best self, and shifting and solidifying their beliefs and values with the help of a mentor.

But those life-changing and transformative conversations are not easy to have with a young person, and mentors of all types can benefit from more tools and training on how to talk about these subjects and help young people build these foundational aspects of their sense of self. Regardless of the main focus of a youth-serving program, part of their mission and work can always emphasize youth belonging and identity development. In any youth-adult context, a focus on relationships that support those two areas of growth will be helpful to our movement.

4. We must further identify and support those who are least likely to find meaningful relationships.

At MENTOR, we believe that quality mentoring relationships are something that every American young person needs and deserves and that those relationships should be accessible throughout every stage and circumstance of a young person's journey. But within this universal call for mentoring, we must remember that there are still inequities in our society regarding who finds and benefits from many forms of mentoring. The good news is that we find evidence here that our mentoring programs are increasingly reaching young people who have faced considerable adversity and challenges — and they often expressed gaining the most from their mentors. But there are other young people across the country who are not only missing out on the benefits of these programs, but on adult support almost entirely. We found a concerning number of young people in this study's 18-to-24-year-old cohort who not only didn't have a mentor but couldn't nominate anyone that they felt was a meaningful person. That's around 6 percent of that age range — roughly 1.8 million young adults who have been going it largely alone. We should assume that there are many more 18 and under experiencing the same.

Our data here only hint at the composition of this group with no mentors and no meaningful people. In many ways they look statistically very much like their mentored peers. But they are more likely to live in rural areas and they are more likely to be single. Sadly, they are significantly less likely to have experienced some of the positive achievements discussed in this report (e.g., being in a leadership position, being on the honor roll, volunteering, college planning/enrollment). They are more likely to have grown up in poverty and live below the poverty line now.

But, surprisingly, they have experienced significantly fewer adverse life challenges than Gen Z as a whole (1.8 on average compared to 2.7 for all 18-to-24-year-olds). These are not the youth in the direst circumstances. There is clearly more to learn about why these young people aren't finding the relationships they need. Our data here is limited, but we do know that when asked about barriers to mentoring, 64 percent said they didn't know how to find a mentor, 61 percent felt there were no mentoring programs available to them, 51 percent didn't understand what mentoring is or its potential value to them, and 43 percent felt there was no adult around them who was available to mentor. Almost a quarter of them said their parent or guardian wasn't interested in them having a mentor.

Right there, in that set of stats about our nation's loneliest young people at this moment, is our call to action and path forward for the next 30 years of growth for the mentoring movement.

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